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Guest Editors

Jesper Falkheimer, Emanuele Invernizzi, Stefania Romenti, Alfonso Siano



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The Strategic Role of Communication in Management

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Aphorisms

1. *Communicating is hearing what is not said*
(Peter Drucker)
2. *If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself*
(Albert Einstein)
3. *Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.*
(Scott Adams)
4. *Communication occurs when, in addition to the message, an extra soul also passes.*
(Henri Bergson)
5. *People can't see what's going on in your brain, the best way to make themselves understood is to tell them.*
(Ian McEwan)

The Strategic Role of Communication in Management

Jesper Falkheimer
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The Strategic Role of
Communication in
Management

Jesper Falkheimer - Emanuele Invernizzi - Stefania Romenti
Alfonso Siano

The concept of strategic communication represents a significant shift from that of corporate communication and, as several scholars have argued (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Vercic and Zerfass, 2017), represents a new paradigm useful for interpreting the broadening content of communication and the evolving role it plays in complex organizations. Role which becomes strategic as it increasingly tends to support top management and directors of other business functions in achieving their overall strategic goals. In fact, the concept of corporate communication is used to identify the set of different communication activities that aims to achieve specific audiences and/or objectives such as avoiding or overcoming crises, engaging internal or external stakeholders, improving the visibility of brands, people, products or services. The overall goal that corporate communication aims to achieve, through the set of its initiatives, is to develop and consolidate the organization's reputation.

The concept of strategic communication is broader, in the sense that it encompasses all corporate communication initiatives and objectives, and it emphasizes that the real goal of communication is to help strategize and support the achievement of the organization's overall goals including both financial, political, social and other dimensions. According to D. Vercic and A. Zerfass (2017) "*Strategic communication deals with the intended and emergent use of communication for building, presenting and supporting strategies of organizations to enhance their overall performance. This includes defining and redefining goals and positioning, leading major initiatives and managing key resources*". In other words, strategic communication involves relevant objectives such as advising, and supporting the decisions of, top management and of the various organizational functions and contributes directly to the achievement of the organization's economic results and success.

On the other hand, Chester Barnard, in the late 1930s, had already predicted that communication should become a structural component of organizations, even to the point of assuming a strategic role in their governance. "Communication technique shapes the form and internal economy of the organization (...) In a comprehensive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place because the structure, size, and field of activity of the organization are almost entirely determined by communication techniques" (Barnard, *The Functions of the Executives*, 1938).

However, it was not until the end of the first decade of this century that the new paradigm of strategic communication was defined by some

of the most relevant communication scholars internationally (Hallahann *et al.*, 2007) as “the use of communication by managers and members of the organization aimed at achieving the organization’s mission”. According to this approach, the most relevant aspect of strategic communication lies precisely in its nature as a constitutive activity of organizations’ management. In fact, strategic communication focuses its attention on how the organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, managers and communication professionals. This process is ideally reciprocal since it demands engagement and involvement from all the stakeholders.

And it was in 2008, at EUPRERA’s international congress *Institutionalizing Public Relations and Corporate Communication*, that communication scholars attending from around the world witnessed, with the results of their research, the advancement of the process of institutionalizing communication within complex organizations. *“Corporate communication has undergone a profound evolution, which has increased its strategic importance in the governance and success of complex organizations. This evolution has created the basis for the ongoing process of institutionalization where the role of communication is ever more important and strategic, because it contributes to the strategic management of organizations and increases their overall value”* (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, the publication in 2014 of the Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication, edited by D. Holtzhausen and A. Zerfass, highlighted how strategic communication is aimed at co-constructing the organization and supporting strategic business decisions aimed at adding value to all business processes. *“Strategic communication also faces a challenge in truly embracing processes of meaning-making beyond the transmission of messages and in bringing about and measuring behavioral outcomes that are aligned with the strategic goals of the organization”*. And, in 2022, the publication of the new Research Handbook on Strategic Communication occurred, edited by Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide, where almost 50 authors developed ideas and sub-fields of strategic communication which has now been established in research and communication management practice all over the world.

The evolution from corporate to strategic communication thus highlights a growth, which began in the early years of this century, in the impact of communication on economic performance and, more generally, on the success of the organizations. Indeed, in recent years the communication function, and particularly the Chief Communication Officer, have been called upon to participate in decisions concerning other corporate functions and the company’s Management Committee, of which the CCO himself is increasingly a part. The reason is that every business activity, from products to sales policies, communicates and therefore it is appropriate and necessary for the communications function to advise and participate in the decisions of top management and other business functions (in the same way that the Chief Financial Officer participates in all business decisions that have financial implications). It is no coincidence that the Chief Communication Officer is increasingly part of the management committee of companies, as evidenced by the ongoing

process of institutionalization of communication in companies, and his or her advice is increasingly sought and used by top management

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The aim of this special issue is to investigate how communication can support the definition and deployment of corporate and business strategies, shaping both strategic and operational managerial decisions from the very first moment. This special issue also has the objective of examining how communication can lead processes to incisively make their effects felt on the companies' bottom line (economic performance) as well as on society as a whole, and finally of helping leaders drive transformation and change processes.

In recent times, the role of communication has become more crucial as witnessed by the increasing number of dedicated organizational functions as well as specialized professionals operating within companies. This phenomenon is driven by several factors, among which we can mention two main ones. On the one hand, corporate citizenship has become the key to the sound development and survival of any company, since it connotes a firm's obligation towards society as a requirement for doing business. Critical to corporate citizenship are actions that are visible, consistent, distinctive, transparent, and authentic, in other words communicated effectively.

On the other hand, following the pandemic, the role of internal communication has gained importance in companies and is today in perfect harmony with that of external communication. This is because not only corporate leaders, but also employees, have an ever-greater responsibility for creating corporate narratives that define deep-seated identity values and companies should clearly express the existing alignment between presiding identity values and mission/vision/business strategy. These elements must be ingrained in communication strategy which must then emphasize their coherence and consistency over time.

The papers presented in this special issue contribute in very different ways to the theme of the role played by strategic communication in the management of organizations and businesses. We will present the 14 papers, chosen from the many that were submitted, starting with those that have a broader approach to the topic of strategic communication and continuing with those that deal with more specific and particular aspects of it. However, as specific as they are, all the communication initiatives presented here share the characteristic of affecting the sustained success, and the economic performance, of the organizations in which they are implemented.

Mirko Olivieri, Lala Hu and Alessia Anzivino in their paper *The role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making* aim to investigate the role of, and to what extent, strategic communication influences the marketing decision making process and the definition of its strategies. The results of this study highlight that strategic communication covers an increasingly central role in the marketing-decision making process of companies. First, and more importantly, it emerged that strategic communication influences the product policy; second, strategic communication favors the innovation of marketing communications. The results of this analysis present an important implication for communication

professionals, and in particular for corporate communication directors, identifying the potential of their role in the strategic decision-making process of organizations.

Elias Weber and Ansgar Zerfass in their paper *Business intelligence in communication management: A framework for data-driven listening and internal consulting* aim to explore how communication professionals can use BI methods based on digital technologies to incorporate insights into managerial decision-making processes. They found that to deliver valuable advice to management in a deeply mediatized world, communication practitioners must draw on data-driven insights on public opinions, social developments and relevant stakeholders. Business intelligence concepts support this by collecting and processing data using digital technologies to support decision making. It enables practitioners to bring the communicative dimension into managerial decisions and align organizations with their “social context and with the most relevant expectations of most relevant stakeholders”. The outlined processes enable communicators to act as internal consultants and ensures that managerial decisions can consider communication-related opportunities and risks.

Cecilia Casalegno, Chiara Civera, Elena Candelo and Raoul Romoli Venturi in their paper *Bridging corporate communication and marketing narratives for organizational success: how collaboration happens* aim to describe the relationship between corporate communication and marketing and to explore whether and how synergistic collaboration between the two functions is needed and works in multinational enterprises. The paper’s findings outline the strategic relevance of corporate communication in guiding corporate strategies and actions and the support of corporate communication to marketing in reformulating advertising campaigns according to a multi-stakeholder perspective. The paper provide practical suggestions to establish proactive and long term collaborations between corporate communication and marketing by aligning the strategic planning of marketing actions to the corporate communication perspective.

Francesca Conte, Paolo Picciocchi, Alfonso Siano and Alessandra Bertolini in their paper *Data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building: the case study of Capital One* aim to investigate the role of strategic communication, supported by the data-driven approach, in the process of building brand identity. The proposed theoretical framework could orientate top management decisions and strengthen the strategic role of communication and brand managers in brand identity building in the digital age. Thanks to strategic communication according to a data-driven logic, managers could develop new value propositions for innovative business models, improve competitive positioning and build personalised relationships. Moreover, the inclusion of data in corporate culture, as well as a synergistic co-existence of various managerial skills, facilitates performance excellence.

Ginevra Testa, Luca Giraldi and Simone Splendiani in their paper *The role of strategic communication in facing paracrisis: a multiple case approach in the lab-grown meat industry*, aim explores the strategic role that communication can play in preventing crises and minimising their negative effects in the cultured meat industry. The results of the study show

that the strategies most used by the four companies analysed were able to create good engagement with the public and stimulate optimism in public comments. These strategies emphasised the companies' commitment to leading the challenges of this sector, educating the public, conveying transparent information, and creating synergies to broaden the audience. The study provides many implications for managers and professionals in monitoring online debate and discussion to contain the negative narratives spread by detractors and develop communication strategies to highlight the positive contributions made by the company's activities.

Martina Frizzo and Daniela Corsaro in their paper *Antifragile crisis communication: an exploratory study*, aim to explore the concept of antifragility and its application to crisis communication in the contemporary business environment marked by perpetual disruptions and uncertainty. The study identifies six critical factors for antifragile crisis communication: experimentation, option generation, stress, redundancy, subtraction, and creativity. These factors contribute to an organization's ability to thrive in the face of ongoing disruptions, aligning with the principles of antifragility. Organizations can enhance their crisis communication strategies by integrating the identified factors, promoting adaptability, and leveraging uncertainty to thrive in the new business environment.

Rossella Gambetti, Silvia Biraghi, Angela Antonia Beccanulli and Stefania Vitulli in their paper *Brand activism in search for an ethical communication leadership: Vivienne Westwood and the clashes between person and brand*, aim to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in the current scenario of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms. The study highlights a series of clashes that arise when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to her changing moods, needs, and desires. This paper highlights the challenges of being an activist leader and brand in contemporary woke society. In so doing, it provides strategic guidelines on how communication should be conceived in the company to achieve ethical leadership and overcome cultural tensions.

Agostino Vollero and Alfonso Siano in their paper *Strategic communication and greenwashing. Theoretical reflections and managerial implications* aim to provide a comprehensive reflection on the role, research directions and managerial implications of a strategic communication approach designed to prevent greenwashing. The study reveals a notable gap in the consideration of strategic communication perspectives within the context of greenwashing. Despite the ongoing emergence of new forms of greenwashing, research predominantly focuses on the supposed benefits and harms resulting from discrepancies between corporate talk and action. This paper argues that more attention should be given to understanding and managing the underlying processes that lead to such misalignments. Recommendations for decision-makers, aimed at preventing accusations of greenwashing and mitigating the negative associated consequences,

include adopting a systemic approach to strategic communication, enhancing transparency and fostering genuine stakeholder engagement.

Angelo Miglietta, Emma Zavarrone, Martha Friel, Vittorio Ottaviani and Andrea Sangermano in their paper *Crafting clarity: a textual framework for optimizing strategic communication in Italian Banking Foundation Mission Reports* aim to investigate the communicative practices of the most relevant Italian banking foundations examining how they use mission reports to balance regulatory obligations with engaging community narratives. The study reveals a dichotomy in their communication approach since some foundations view mission reports as regulatory obligations while others draw reports as strategic communication tools for community involvement and societal impact. The findings can guide efforts in strategic communication practices of non-profit organisations, offering insights into enhancing the transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity of mission reports.

Iza Gigauri, Maria Palazzo and Antonella Ferri in their paper *Linking strategic communication and sustainability reporting. Exploring corporate websites of Georgian Banks* aim to analyse the existing link between strategic communication and CSR/Sustainability in the banking sector in an emerging country. The study shows that banks in Georgia invest heavily in CSR and Sustainability programs to demonstrate their social and ecological orientations. Special attention is devoted to education, charity, and ecological projects. However, the strategic communication lacks the comprehensiveness and coherence since the financial companies tend to communicate information on their websites about CSR just in terms of programs and results. Nevertheless, CSR and sustainability communication of Georgian banks is significant because it implements their reputation and brand image, promotes sustainable practices and contributes to the economic and social development of the country.

Martha Friel, Grazia Murtarelli and Vittorio Ottaviani in their paper *Unlocking the power of strategic communication: a deep dive into industrial tourism and engaging company openings* aim to explore the potential of strategic communication in the context of industrial tourism open-door events, investigating how effective storytelling by companies can positively influence visitors' perceptions. The analysis suggests that open-door events are a valuable platform for companies to communicate their brand stories and enhance internal communication processes. Visitors who perceive companies positively during these events are more likely to make purchases and recommend products. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the intersection of strategic communication and industrial tourism. It reveals how effective storytelling during open-door events positively influences visitor perceptions, engagement, and actions, shedding light on innovative communication approaches within this underexplored context.

Marta Maria Montella in her paper *The strategic role of communication in management and the contribution of corporate museums*, focuses on corporate museums' contribution to the strategic role of communication in management, approaching the topic from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The study shows that while there is a high and widespread

awareness on the part of corporate museum management about the potential of these institutions to direct all stakeholders for the benefit of the enterprise, differences emerge regarding the implementation of the most effective strategies and tools to optimize their achievable value. The paper aims to highlight the strategies and actions that should be implemented to improve the performances of corporate museums in terms of strategic communication.

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Chiara Valentini in her paper *Charting the 'Lunar Alignment' in today's media landscape: exploring perceptions of Italian strategic communicators and journalists in a mediatized world*, aims to explore how Italian strategic communicators and journalists perceive their own and each other's identities and functions in the current Italian media landscape. It investigates how these professionals respond to mediatization and how this, in turn, has supported mutual positive relationships. The study highlights to what extent perceptions of professional identities and roles in strategic communication and journalism have evolved, while the growing mediatization of practices among strategic communicators has enhanced journalists' perceptions of relationships. There is noticeable convergence in the skills and competencies of these professionals, alongside a mutual recognition of the importance of high-quality information.

Ganga Sasidharan Dhanesh in her paper *Connecting with visually acculturated audiences: A hypermodern perspective*, aim to examine drivers behind the emergent communication preference of audiences towards visual media in a social-media saturated age. It also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences. The study, using the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification, suggests that organizations can enable identification with visually acculturated audiences through co-creating identity through individual rhetors who are driven by creating extraordinary and unique identities based on experiential, emotion-rich consumption, and their love of the spectacular. Communicators in organizations can strengthen their audience engagement strategies through co-creating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with these hypermodern audiences.

At the end of the presentation of this Special Issue, as guest editors, we would like to thank the Editor in chief and the co-Editor in chief, prof. Marta Ugolini and prof. Alberto Pastore, for the opportunity they gave us and for their guidance during the process, and we would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this Issue, enriching the debate on strategic communication as a discipline of management, and giving their input to illustrate how and to what extent a wide variety of communication initiatives can contribute to the sustained success and economic performance of organizations.

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The role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making

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Abstract

Framing of the research: In recent years, the academic literature has focused on the topic of strategic communication as an emerging field of knowledge encompassing public relations, organizational communication and marketing communications. In this research stream, scholars interpret strategic communication as a discipline that embraces complexity and interdisciplinarity, with the aim of fully grasping the different nuances of the organization without neglecting strategy, orientation, and organizational objectives.

Purpose of the paper. The aim of this study is to investigate the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process.

Methodology. We conducted a qualitative multiple-case study analysis involving five companies operating in the food industry. Specifically, we collected qualitative data from seven semi-structured interviews with key informants operating in the case companies, company visits, and secondary data. Using multiple methods to collect qualitative data from various sources was useful to avoid bias from a single method and to obtain robust results.

Findings. The results highlight that strategic communication plays an increasingly central role in the marketing decision-making process of companies. Specifically, our analysis reveals that, on the one hand, strategic communication influences product policy, while on the other, it fosters the innovation of marketing communications.

Research limits. This study presents limitations related to the generalizability of the results, as it adopts a qualitative perspective. Future studies could include the consumer perspective by adopting quantitative methodologies.

Practical implications. The analysis presents a series of implications for communication and marketing professionals, and in particular for corporate communication directors, identifying the potential of their role in the company's strategic decisions.

Originality of the paper. This study contributes to the management literature by clarifying the ways in which strategic communication influences the marketing decision-making process. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study depicting a framework summarizing how strategic communication influences companies' product policy and marketing communications.

Key words: strategic communication; marketing decision-making; marketing communications; multiple-case study.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a series of disruptive events, including the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing wars, have made the economic situation at the global level particularly uncertain. The recent geopolitical crises complicated the international scenario, with strong repercussions for inflation and consumption dynamics (Istat, 2023).

In this scenario, corporate communication has changed profoundly, playing an increasingly central role not only in developing the company's reputational capital but also in organizational decision-making and strategic processes, bringing out paradigms based on co-creation mechanisms between firms and stakeholders (Siano *et al.*, 2022). In fact, these unexpected events have led to a reinterpretation of corporate communication and the recognition of its role in achieving a competitive advantage in a new communication scenario (Ceccotti *et al.*, 2019). According to a recent study by EY Italy (2022), 54% of Italian companies increased their attention toward the communication function over the last 3 years, and for 64% of firms, the communication function took on an increasingly strategic role, which was adequately recognized in the company.

Corporate communication, therefore, has become central to both the functioning and development of the company as a support for its various components, and represents a necessary tool for integrating those same components (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015). More generally, corporate communication has taken a strategic role in the management of relationships with the markets and in the governance of the company in terms of management of the corporate structure (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

In this vein, the strategic communication approach involves continuous processes ranging from construction, presentation, implementation, negotiation, and reconstruction of the company strategy (Van Ruler, 2018), overcoming communication models focused on conversations and relationships, which are no longer sufficient (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023). Therefore, strategic communication was conceptualized as “an agile management process in which the focus is on feeding the arenas in which meanings are presented, negotiated, constructed, or reconstructed for strategy building and strategy implementation, and on testing strategic decisions by presenting and negotiating these in a continuous loop” (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 379).

Given this scenario and considering the complex and multidimensional nature of strategic communication, it is necessary to reconsider its role in business decisions and in the marketing approach (Collesei, 2012). Although scholars have conducted many studies on strategic communication in recent years (i.e., Argenti, 2017; Falkheimer, 2014; Rudeloff *et al.*, 2022), it remains necessary to investigate how communication affects the definition and implementation of business strategies by influencing the marketing decision-making process. Hence, we pose the following research question:

RQ. How does strategic communication affect decision-making processes in marketing?

To address this RQ, we investigated the role of strategic communication in companies from the food and beverage (F&B) industry, exploring how corporate communication could influence companies' activities, impacting innovative business decisions in light of modern society's transformations.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the academic literature on strategic communication, highlighting the various definitions and interpretations of the concept, while in Section 3, the methodology adopted to address our research aim is explained-i.e., a multiple-case study analysis. The findings are presented in Section 4, and the discussion and conclusion are reported in Section 5, focusing on both the theoretical contribution and the managerial implications of this research. Finally, limitations and future research directions conclude the manuscript.

2. Literature review

2.1 Strategic communication in academic literature

The concept of strategic communication began to spread in management and communication studies in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). Previously, this concept was known within national governments and armed forces (Farwell, 2012). Nowadays, particularly in the United States and Europe, strategic communication has been introduced in universities by linking it to the fields of marketing and corporate communication, public relations, financial communication, etc. (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). However, strategic communication today is understood by scholars as a distinct approach focused on the communication process, opening new spaces for interdisciplinary research (Argenti, 2017).

Indeed, over the past few decades, the academic literature has focused on the topic of strategic communication as the omnidirectional diachronic ongoing process of meaning construction (Macnamara, 2018; Sandhu, 2009; Van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass and Huck, 2007), emphasizing the role of communication departments in complex organizations. In this process, the importance of communication alignment between organizational objectives, vision, brand, and identity emerged (Botan, 2018).

In general terms, strategic communication is defined as an "emerging field of knowledge bridging established research fields such as public relations, organizational communication and marketing communications" (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023, p. 15)-i.e., an interdisciplinary paradigm (Werder *et al.*, 2018). In this vein, Heide *et al.* (2018) interpreted strategic communication as a discipline that embraces complexity and interdisciplinarity, with the aim of fully grasping the different nuances of the organization without neglecting strategy, orientation, and organizational objectives.

One of the first definitions of strategic communication proposed by Hallahan *et al.* (2007) interprets the concept as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission. However, this

definition has been superseded by other theorizations of the concept, which focus on how strategic communication can support an organization in fulfilling its mission (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). In this perspective, strategic communication has been defined as an overall strategy to improve the strategic positioning of an organization (Argenti *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, Zerfass *et al.* (2018, p. 493) defined strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.” In this definition, therefore, strategic communication refers to both messaging and listening activities, including dialogues with stakeholders, social media monitoring, and information from employees. In other words, this new role of communication is considered strategic when it becomes substantial or significant for the development, growth, identity, or survival of the organization (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). To achieve these objectives, strategic communication requires an integrated and multilevel approach in which each organizational function achieves specific objectives through the most appropriate and effective channels. In fact, to make this strategic communication approach effective, all channels must be personalized with respect to the specific objective to be achieved, but at the same time consistent with both each other and the company’s overall strategy (Argenti *et al.*, 2005).

2.2 *The role of strategic communication in achieving business objectives*

According to the management literature, strategic communication offers a concrete contribution to the decision-making organizational process in an evolving business context (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2012), as it represents a critical organizational management process (Romenti and Invernizzi, 2011; Falkheimer, 2014).

In general terms, according to Volk and Zerfass (2018), the common thread of strategic communication studies is the emphasis on the notion of purposeful, intentional, or objectives-driven. Falkheimer *et al.* (2017), for example, argued that this concept is key for the development of effective business strategies, as strategic communication can contribute to business success. To achieve this business aim, Argenti *et al.* (2005) showed that strategic communication requires an integrated, multilevel approach. According to this framework, each communication function achieves specific objectives through the most appropriate channels.

Particularly, Invernizzi and Romenti (2015) identified four contributions of strategic communication for organizations, namely alignment, energizing, visionary, and constitutive roles. These two authors interpreted strategic communication as a support to the organization to achieve alignment with external expectations, and particularly for monitoring the activities and the organizational context, capable of providing key inputs to align corporate strategies with stakeholders’ expectations and ensure the organization’s survival and legitimacy. More specifically, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) identified a link between discourse and the social practice of strategy, defining this practice as a set of interactions and negotiations of multiple actors they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.

However, recent academic studies have highlighted that strategic communication is not managed only internally by the organization, but for the achievement of its strategic objectives, it also includes external actors and practices, such as the so-called “strategic social media influencer communication.” For example, according to Enke and Borchers (2019), strategic social media influencer communication is playing an increasingly key role, both in strategic communication studies and in business practices. Social media influencers represent third-party actors who have considerable influence on organizational stakeholders through the production and distribution of content and interaction with stakeholders (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). Hence, in this perspective, strategic social media communication is conceptualized as the strategic use of communication in which influencers, on the one hand, perform activities of strategic relevance to organizational goals, and on the other, take an active part in interactive processes on topics relevant to the organization, adopting a moderating role (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

More generally, the role of digital channels is increasingly central to the strategic communication debate. A recent study by Wuersch *et al.* (2024) revealed that both the technical nature of the organizational system, such as digital platforms, and social digital elements-i.e., the corporate culture-are interconnected at all levels of communication. In this scenario, companies’ ability to communicate and interact independently on digital platforms has become a critical area for the strategic management of communication (Valentini *et al.*, 2012). As a result, new strategic communication practices are required for organizations (Pekkala and Erkkilä, 2024), such as identifying new ways to increase user engagement on social media (Triantafyllidou and Yannas, 2024).

In conclusion, strategic communication has a multidirectional and complex nature that must be managed in harmony with the organizational context (O’Connor and Shumate, 2018). In this perspective, strategic communication involves the interconnection of organizations, messages, and stakeholders, and plays a key role in creating and maintaining business relationships between the parties (Knudsen and Lemmergaard, 2014; Merz *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, recent strategic communication studies have adopted a multidimensional network perspective, which allows scholars to analyze the diverse types of networks that strategic communication helps create, maintain, and dissolve.

In this regard, O’Connor and Shumate (2018, p. 400) revealed that “both the network strategies created, and the outcomes of those strategies are described in network terms.” According to them, as the affiliation network around an organization increases, so does the number of actors who share the organization’s message. In summary, three factors determine the results of a company’s engagement efforts: (1) the prior state of the affiliate network, (2) the effectiveness of the organization’s network strategies, and (3) the effects of the strategies network of other organizational actors (O’Connor and Shumate, 2018). In addition, a study by Young and Pieterse (2015) showed that strategic communication professionals should also leverage the capital derived from the composition and structure of the interpersonal network to facilitate information flows in networks. It is believed that

networks are beneficial for accessing unique and non-redundant sources of information.

3. Methodology

The objective of this research is to investigate how strategic communication influences the marketing decision-making process of organizations. In pursuing this research objective, we considered a constitutive view of strategic communication-i.e., the intentional and purposeful use of communication that contributes to the achievement of business objectives (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015; Volk and Zerfass, 2018).

Due to the exploratory aim of this paper and following previous studies on strategic communication (i.e., Besley *et al.*, 2016; Birã *et al.*, 2018; Nothhaft, 2016; Rudeloff *et al.*, 2022), we conducted qualitative research. In particular, we opted for the case study methodology (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Specifically, a multiple-case study analysis was conducted, as “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as more robust” (Yin, 1984, p. 48). By conducting a multiple-case study, researchers can bring together several patterns and draw a more complete theoretical picture (Eisenhardt, 1989). This methodology allows for an in-depth study of the phenomenon that is the object of our analysis-i.e., the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process-thereby increasing its theoretical understanding (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In this research, five Italian companies operating in the food and beverage (F&B) industry have been analyzed. According to Eisenhardt (1989), between four and 10 cases usually suffice for multiple-case studies.

3.1 Research context

The study analyzes the F&B sector because of its economic importance worldwide and its strong cultural influence on communications (Appelbaum and Halliburton, 1993). At the global level, the projected market volume of the F&B market will reach US\$3.80bn by 2027 (Statista, 2024). F&B companies adopt communications, using both traditional and digital tools, to communicate their sustainability actions to consumers and other stakeholders as communication reflects firm values (Belyaeva *et al.*, 2020; Reilly and Heinan, 2014). Moreover, Tseng *et al.* (2020) have recently found that persuasive communication effectively used by F&B companies can help convince consumers to address a sustainable consumption transition. Thus, the F&B industry is an adequate setting for investigating our research question.

3.2 Case studies selection and data collection

To select our case studies, we opted for the theoretical sampling method (Mason, 2002). We chose five different cases operating in the

Italian F&B industry. To ensure heterogeneity in our sample, we selected companies of different sizes-i.e. Firms A, D, and E are SMEs, while Firms B and C are multinational organizations-with a consequent diversity of corporate communication departments. In addition, as reported in Table 1, the five companies offer different products in the food and beverage sector. Therefore, these case studies, with their differences and similarities (Cucino *et al.*, 2024; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), were considered particularly interesting for the explorative purpose of this paper.

Within the five case studies, we identified seven key informants with extensive professional experience and knowledge of the corporate communication and marketing strategies of their organizations, including communication directors, corporate communication managers, and marketing managers (Table 1).

Tab. 1: Companies' overview and interviewed key informants

Company	Product category	Key informants' role	Headquarters region	Foundation year
Firm A	Cured meat	1. Marketing manager	Lombardy, Italy	1812
Firm B	Packaged F&B	2. External communication manager 3. Corporate communication and digital specialist 4. Corporate communication manager	Lombardy, Italy	1866
Firm C	Tomato sauce	5. Corporate communication director	Emilia Romagna, Italy	1899
Firm D	Olive oil	6. Communication and image director	Umbria, Italy	1920
Firm E	Fruits and vegetables	7. Founder	Emilia Romagna, Italy	2015

Source: Authors' elaboration

In particular, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the seven key informants face-to-face, via phone, or MS Teams, between February and October 2023. The semi-structured interviews lasted 45 minutes on average and were conducted in Italian. All the interviews were audiotaped, and the registrations were then transcribed and analyzed through content analysis (Neuman, 1997) performed by the researchers involved in the interpretation process.

We used semi-structured questions to allow the interviewees to answer as completely as possible. Moreover, subsequent discussions were informal and facilitated by supporting questions. Specifically, the interviews followed an interview protocol developed by the researchers based on the literature review. The protocol covered the following topics:

1. The role of strategic communication in the organization;
2. The definition process of the business strategy, with a focus on the contribution of strategic communication; and
3. The specific activities of the marketing and communication departments, and the synergies between the two.

Moreover before or after the interviews, the key informants or other professionals working in the analyzed companies shared additional documents with the researchers that could be useful for the purpose of this research, such as corporate presentations, articles on the communication

campaigns they promoted, and materials relating to specific communication projects. We guaranteed anonymity to the organizations involved in the research to reduce social pressure and ensure that the data collected could not be traced back to individual respondents (Krosnick and Presser, 2010; Coffelt, 2017).

Furthermore, data collection included the participation of researchers in company events and visits. These data were collected in parallel, and the various sets of results were interpreted concurrently to draw valid conclusions regarding the research problem.

3.3 Data analysis

For the data analysis of the case studies, the researchers identified the commonalities rather than the case differences, as the analysis process was guided by insights applicable across all the firms (Hu and Olivieri, 2021). According to Eisenhardt (1989), multiple cases represent a powerful means of creating theory because they allow replication and extension between individual cases. In this methodology, the former is considered crucial, starting from individual cases, and is useful for corroborating specific propositions. In this way, random associations are eliminated, and the findings produce more nuanced and complex theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Following Yin's (2009) approach, if the outcome of the replication was contradictory to the initial proposition, then we reviewed the data and again tested the proposition with other cases.

More specifically, for the data analysis in this study, we adopted an abductive approach-i.e., a non-linear research process that continuously compares data and theory. According to this process, the theoretical framework was modified based on the empirical findings derived from the data analysis, after which the new framework was elaborated. In this systematic combining approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), matching between theory and data is crucial; that is, going back and forth comparing the theoretical framework, data sources, and analysis.

In particular, for the analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, we followed the recommendations made by Corbin and Strauss (1990), opting for an open, axial, and selective coding strategy. Then, we identified the key points found in the interview transcripts and labeled them as codes. The ones with thematic affinity were grouped and formed the categories that were correlated with each other in the last phase. In this way, the thematic subcategories were defined.

Finally, to increase the robustness of the study, as recommended by Yin (2013), the data collected from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated with secondary data (i.e., trend reports, social media accounts, analysis of communication campaigns, corporate websites, etc.).

4. Findings

The results show the critical role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making processes. In particular, it emerges from the

analysis of the five case studies that strategic communication has become a structural component of corporate strategic and operational processes, with particular reference to marketing strategies. More specifically, the competence of communication departments has become central in the decision-making and coordination activities of both product policy and marketing communications. On the one hand, corporate communication plays an increasingly central role in defining and innovating a product policy capable of satisfying consumer needs. On the other, corporate communication plays a strategic role in activating relationships with the market-i.e., in marketing communications.

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4.1 The contribution of strategic communication for defining and innovating product policy

The results highlight that strategic communication influences the product policy and product development of the analyzed companies. The founder of Firm E explained: “Communication comes even before the product development. It has an impact on the development of the market.” Specifically, in the case of Firm E, communication was crucial to give credit to the product and move away from a bucolic product narrative to a different and more strategic communication that highlighted the product’s characteristics and the ecosystem around the offering system. Through investment in communication, an attempt was made to work on the product itself, which also became the bearer of industry-related values related to a specific profession. Products’ storytelling has also become essential to intercept new segments of consumers, particularly younger ones.

Regarding the role of communication in the definition of the product policy, the corporate communication director of Firm C declared that his department detected from consumers the need to diversify the offer by using new raw materials. This need, after careful analysis supervised by top management, resulted in the expansion of their marketing offer. In 2019, Firm C included, among its products, a yellow tomato sauce made with the yellow datterino tomato, which was highly appreciated by consumers.

In this vein, the marketing manager of Firm A highlighted that through communication, they are able to intercept new and different targets. In recent years, in line with the newest consumption trends related to food, they decided to develop a new pure product line. The pure line guarantees products with a natural taste resulting from the choice of high-quality raw materials and a supply chain that respects animal welfare at every stage. In particular, these products are defined as pure because they have no preservatives or antibiotics and because they come from a controlled and certified supply chain. In the same product line, in consideration of the consumer feedback that the Firm A communication department detected on various channels, gluten-free, lactose-free, without added polyphosphates, and without added glutamate products have been introduced, broadening the marketing offer.

Corporate communication also played a key role in the development of new products within Firm B. In this case, the communication department, among its activities, identified the consumption trends at an early stage

to adapt the product portfolio in collaboration with the marketing department. For example, Firm B recently capitalized on vegan and vegetarian trends by leveraging its classic brands. Therefore, the product offering was expanded to include coffee creamers and dairy-free ice creams in the United States, plant-based drinks in Brazil, and products similar to meat but of plant origin in Europe. Finally, through recent acquisitions of new brands, Firm B rapidly expanded its offering of natural, organic, and plant-based products in Latin America, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The external communication manager of Firm B affirmed, “Our promise is supporting and speeding up the transition to a regenerative food system, focusing on accessible and sustainable nutrition”. To meet these new consumer trends linked to the theme of sustainability, in addition to considering the characteristics of the product, Firm B, also paid attention to packaging using environmentally friendly materials and communicating this choice on various offline and online channels.

It emerges from our data analysis that in some case studies, such as Firms A, B, and E, packaging represented a tool to communicate sustainability to their stakeholders. In particular, for Firm E, packaging was also a way to communicate some social sustainability issues, such as issues related to prevention, genomics, and healthy lifestyles. Consistent with the company’s mission and its focus on prevention issues-which was also made concrete through constant funding for entities involved in scientific research-through the communication of its products, the company sought to bring its targets closer to issues that until now had been disclosed only by doctors or specialists in the field, but using simpler language.

4.2 The role of strategic communication in innovating marketing communications

Our study reveals that strategic communication plays a key role in innovating companies’ marketing communication strategies. For example, in Firm B, the department of corporate communication noted the need to make its marketing communication strategy more inclusive and oriented toward the diversities of its target. The corporate communication manager of Firm B stated, “Considering that the Italian population is very varied and that we have a portfolio of brands and products for all Italian families, (...) we need to be careful when writing copy, therefore from the point of view of marketing communication.” To make its marketing communication strategy more appropriate in the current social context, in consideration of the diversity of consumers, Firm B also promoted a series of internal communication activities addressed to all employees. For example, various workshops were held to raise employee awareness of the topic of diversity and inclusion. According to the corporate communication manager of Firm B, the company has taken this path rather than imposing guidelines on inclusive language on its employees because it is necessary to promote a cultural change naturally reflected in marketing communication strategies.

Similarly, Firm C, in line with the digital communication paradigms, launched an online communication campaign dedicated to international markets using the levers of the advergame to increase brand awareness and

strengthen the bond between users and the brand. The objective of this campaign was to involve and entertain consumers, informing them about the life cycle that the tomato goes through and explaining the processing techniques that allow the brand to preserve the preciousness and freshness of the raw material. In particular, the campaign was made up of three mini-games through which the user comes into contact with the many varieties of tomato and chooses which one to grow, respecting the rhythms of nature, and concluding the experience with the harvesting of the fruits that have reached maturation.

Through this communication campaign, Firm C described the processes of its supply chain in an innovative way, with reference to the processing phases that characterize its products, highlighting the Italian tradition to international consumers.

Furthermore, the role of corporate communication is increasingly central to communicating business strategy, such as the adoption of a sustainable approach. In this regard, the founder of Firm E declared:

“We invest a lot in sustainability. We were the first to adopt the compostable films, and without the communication, the message would not have reached the consumer and it is an important message to give awareness to the consumer, but also to make him understand the costs linked to this type of choice. Therefore, [it is] a communication that also helps to make company choices understood.”

Collected data has also shown that for Firm E, communication was crucial not only in informing customers about its strategic decisions, but also in highlighting its partnerships with other sustainability-oriented companies from various sectors. Additionally, the company’s emphasis on communication has helped it establish a unique market position in an industry that appears to be highly competitive.

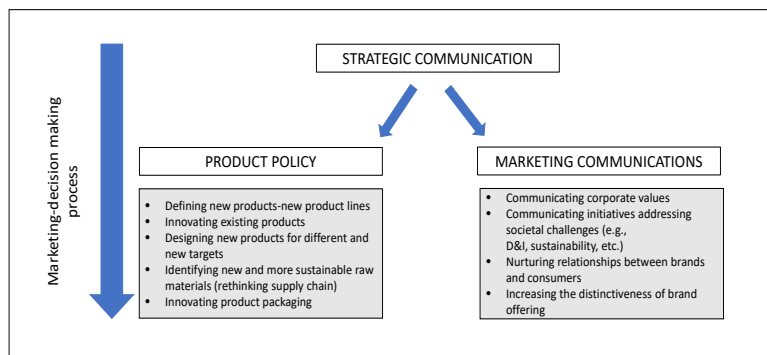
Likewise, the role of the communication department was key for Firm C in communicating organizational choices regarding social sustainability. Its corporate communication director said that his company decided for several years to purchase raw materials only from companies that respect some parameters that protect workers, preventing them from being exploited to obtain greater results. Firm C also introduced an anonymous system to report suppliers that did not respect these parameters. To convey to stakeholders and consumers the importance of these social sustainability initiatives, the role of corporate communication was fundamental and influenced the marketing strategy.

5. Discussion

From our research, it emerges that strategic communication drives the marketing decision-making processes of companies, particularly in relation to their product policy, and marketing communications. Figure 1 represents a framework focusing on how strategic communication

influences the marketing decision-making process of the analyzed organizations.

Fig. 1: Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

With regard to product policy, the results of our analysis reveal that strategic communication plays a key role in product innovation that is implemented to meet consumers' needs. Consistent with the study by Falahat *et al.* (2020), our findings highlight the importance of product innovation capabilities within companies to obtain a competitive advantage. To this end, our key informants reiterated, for example, that strategic digital communication campaigns allowed them to interact with consumers in a more direct way, to constantly monitor consumers' reactions and feedback related to their products, such as in the case of the communication campaign of Firm C dedicated to international consumers. In this vein, as argued by Enke and Borchers (2019), strategic communication assumes a central role in business practices-i.e., product innovation. Indeed, the analyzed companies have adapted their products considering the consumers' reactions, suggestions, and comments. The case companies have innovated existing products, such as introducing more sustainable raw materials or investing in sustainable packaging. Moreover, companies have launched new product lines in existing markets or have developed new products for international markets. From a strategic perspective, firms that leverage communications as a key resource react faster and gain a competitive advantage.

In addition, data analysis has shown that companies, through appropriate strategic communication processes, develop new offerings (Anzivino, 2021; Durmusoglu *et al.*, 2022) considering the diverse targets of consumers, and succeed in making their brands more inclusive and acceptable, such as in the case of Firm A, which developed a new product line to intercept a broader target with different needs. Indeed, according to Invernizzi and Romenti (2015), strategic communication also plays an alignment role of values both between the different departments of organizations (internal level) and the company and its stakeholders (external level). With regard to marketing communications, our research confirms that strategic communication plays a crucial role in several

objectives. For example, strategic communication helps firms spread corporate values among stakeholders and, in general, fulfill the corporate mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). In addition, our results demonstrate that strategic communication is key to successfully addressing societal challenges (Colleoni *et al.*, 2022; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). The communication activities implemented by the analyzed firms express corporate values and give visibility to their actions. For example, it has emerged that strategic communication drives business decisions about diversity, equity, and inclusion topics, including gender (Cowart and Wagner, 2021; Zayer *et al.*, 2019) or ethnicity (Peñaloza, 2018; Strebinger *et al.*, 2018). Companies have recently adopted more inclusive marketing communications toward different targets, both externally and internally. Externally, institutional communications related to companies' sustainability actions toward the environment or workers contribute to improving the overall corporate image. Internally, several communications activities promote companies' welfare initiatives and employees' well-being. Also, from a consumer perspective, internal communication improves the overall corporate reputation.

Moreover, our findings show that strategic communication in F&B companies is taking on an increasingly important role in strengthening existing business relationships, identifying new key players, and, in general, developing effective business strategies. According to Falkheimer *et al.* (2017), strategic communication can contribute to the success of organizations if effectively adopted in an integrated manner into company processes.

In line with the latest research, it emerges from our analysis that there is a need for more research on the role of practitioners in making decisions about diversity and inclusion (Windels, 2016), and meeting the needs of minorities-limitedly considered by most firms in the past.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

At the theoretical level, this study responds to the need for more empirical research in the field of strategic communication (Falkheimer, 2014) by providing an original study in the context of the F&B industry. Specifically, our findings highlight the central role of strategic communication in driving the marketing decision-making process of companies operating in the F&B industry. Indeed, although previous studies have focused on the influence of corporate communication on marketing strategies (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009), this research highlights the areas of the marketing decision-making process impacted by strategic communication that are product policy and the development of marketing communications. With this research, we contribute to the management literature clarifying how the marketing decision-making process is strongly influenced by strategic communication. On the one hand, the product policy of the companies is affected by strategic communication, which is crucial to designing new product lines, innovating existing products, and adopting more sustainable raw materials, as requested by the emerging sustainable and ethical trends of consumption (Illia *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, strategic

communication is key in innovating marketing communications, and specifically to nurturing the relationship between brands and consumers and other stakeholders, increasing the distinctiveness of the offering and communicating corporate values.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study presents a series of practical implications for marketing and communication professionals. This research represents a key contribution in the F&B context to consolidating the knowledge of strategic communication practices that influence the marketing decision-making process within companies. In particular, in the Italian market, many traditionally managed F&B companies are still lagging in terms of communication. After the Covid-19 pandemic, companies still allocate limited budgets to marketing and communication departments. Professionals who operate in these business areas, therefore, face challenges in developing digital communication campaigns (Harvard Business Review Italia, 2023).

Specifically, it emerged from our analysis that communication managers should embrace meaning-making processes that go beyond the transmission of messages and address appropriate strategies for achieving the organization's strategic objectives (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009).

The communication departments of companies play an increasingly central role in the marketing decision-making process and are fundamental both for defining product policy and for innovating marketing communication. Communication professionals should focus more on consolidating the relationship between brands and consumers and on identifying new consumers by communicating the product offering, the characteristics of the products that meet their needs, the strategy, and the company approach-i.e., one oriented toward sustainability.

In other words, through concrete actions, both marketing and corporate communication professionals can support effective business strategies in this evolving context and address societal challenges (Colleoni *et al.*, 2022). To date, the companies involved in this study seem to be making a concrete effort to meet the needs and to satisfy the expectations of heterogeneous targets, such as consumers from international markets or from different cultural backgrounds (Crick *et al.*, 2020; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023). The role of the communication professional is crucial in this effort.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research directions

This study investigated the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process. It emerged from our analysis that within this process, strategic communication plays a central role in defining product policy and marketing communications strategies. In this regard, the study presented both an original contribution to the academic debate on the topic of strategic communication within companies operating in the Italian context, and useful managerial implications for professionals

and entrepreneurs who deal with communication and marketing in organizations.

However, this research suffers from some limitations, therefore it suggests future research directions in the marketing and strategic communication fields. First, we adopted a qualitative multiple-case study involving five companies operating in the same industry (food and beverage) and market (Italy), thereby limiting the generalizability of the results. Future research could extend the analysis by considering other sectors and countries to investigate the role of strategic communication in the marketing decision-making process. Broadening the sample of companies, including other countries' firms and other industries, to be compared to the Italian F&Bs would increase the generalizability of the results.

Second, our research did not consider the perspective of other external stakeholders-i.e., consumers, partners, industry experts-and their perception of the communication strategies of the analyzed firms. Researchers could therefore, in the future, adopt the theoretical perspective of consumer behavior and psychology and investigate how strategic communication messages influence their decision-making process.

Third, we adopted a qualitative approach, collecting semi-structured interviews with professionals operating in the five case companies. To favor methodological diversity, other qualitative methodologies-i.e., qualitative content analysis or ethnographies-or quantitative research methods-i.e., questionnaires-could be employed in future studies.

Finally, our research did not focus on the evolution of companies' communication strategies over time. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective to analyze the case studies to identify how the role of strategic communication is evolving within organizations.

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Business intelligence in communication management: A framework for data-driven listening and internal consulting

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Abstract

Frame of the research: Providing insights on public opinions, social developments and relevant stakeholders is an important strategic contribution of communication in management. This sheds light on listening and internal consulting in communication management research and practice - how communicators can integrate these tasks into their daily work and how they can use them to support executives in their business decisions.

Objectives: This article explores how communication professionals can use business intelligence (BI) methods based on digital technologies to incorporate communication insights into managerial decision-making processes.

Methodology: An interdisciplinary literature analysis was performed to develop a novel conceptual framework. This was validated in a qualitative interview study.

Findings: To utilize information from external and internal sources for internal consulting, communicators need to process data, translate them into relevant information for decision-making, and make them accessible to decision-makers in organizations. The framework shows how this can be achieved through a BI process that covers all phases as well as the necessary technologies and applications, from cleansing and merging data to accessing aggregated information.

Managerial implications: The outlined process enables communicators to act as internal consultants and ensures that managerial decisions can consider communication-related opportunities and risks.

Limitations: The framework could not be tested in a large-scale study so far, as integrating BI in communication management is still an emerging practice. Future studies should also examine the prerequisites and practices of communicators performing an advisory role drawing on BI insights.

Originality of the paper: This article contributes to the body of knowledge by systematically introducing BI to communication management. It also adds to current debates on the digitalization of the field and new roles for communication practitioners.

Key words: advising; business intelligence; communication management; corporate communications; internal consulting

1. Introduction

Business leaders must consider a wide range of circumstances and impacts when making managerial decisions. Typical starting points are analyses of the company and its environment. In addition to direct

relationships with customers, suppliers and competitors, the socio-cultural, political, and social environment in which the company is embedded plays a decisive role (Daft, 2016). Stakeholder theory and corporate communications theories alike argue that companies have to align their mission and vision with “what the environment will allow or encourage it to do” (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 117) in order to build and secure legitimacy and acceptance.

Communication departments and practitioners take on this task. This requires an integration of insights from stakeholder networks and public opinion monitoring into corporate decision-making processes - a task that can be accomplished by communication professionals enacting the role as internal consultants and advisers (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Fieseler *et al.*, 2015; Volk *et al.*, 2017; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). Empirical research across Europe shows that role is expected to become increasingly important in the coming years (Zerfass *et al.*, 2021) - a development that can be welcomed by communicators, as it strengthens the strategic influence of communication departments and thus improves their positioning (Brockhaus and Zerfass, 2022). More generally spoken, the communication function of companies and other organizations has not only an *outbound dimension*, which encompasses the consistent, transparent and effective positioning of the organization in its environment and the alignment of communication messages with the organizational strategy, but also an *inbound dimension*. This is characterized by incorporating stakeholder expectations, relevant developments in the societal environment, and potential communicative risks in managerial decision making by consulting top management and other executives in decision-making processes (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015; Volk *et al.*, 2017).

However, it is largely unclear how this can be done in a globalized and data-driven environment, where the communication between organizations and their stakeholders is increasingly shifting to digital channels (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023) and a plethora of available data makes it increasingly difficult to identify relevant information. This article closes this gap by introducing the debate on business intelligence (BI) (Baars and Kemper, 2021; Olszak, 2016) to communication management research. It takes companies and corporate communication activities as an example, but the considerations are also relevant for the communication of other types of organizations like non-profits, associations or governmental entities.

BI is a well-established conception in the business administration and information systems discourses and has been neglected so far in the emerging debate on the digitalization of communication management (A.W. Page Society, 2021; Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023). Digital technologies can be used to convey communication messages (outbound), but also to collect and analyze data (inbound). This enables practitioners to plan communication strategies, but also provides valuable insights that can be used by other corporate functions and for the definition of corporate strategies. To this end, the relevant information must be identified, processed, and shared. While previous work in communication science deals exclusively with the use of digital technologies in sub-areas such as social media and Big Data

analytics (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018; Wiencierz and Röttger, 2019), the design of a comprehensive BI process for communication management is missing. If communication practitioners assume the role of internal advisors and want to exploit this potential, they can support the company's bottom line by providing insights into the concerns, demands and interests of stakeholders.

The process of creating internal consulting services in communication management has not been explored in depth to date. Therefore, this article examines the process of creating internal communication consulting services first, before focusing on the deployment of BI in this context. It addresses the following overarching research question:

RQ: How can communication practitioners leverage data-driven business intelligence to support managerial decision-making processes?

To answer this question, two sub-questions need to be answered:

RQ1: How can communication practitioners advise internal clients and what added value do they generate for internal clients?

RQ2: How can business intelligence based on digital applications, processes and products be used for internal consulting services by communication practitioners?

This article contributes to the body of knowledge by systematically introducing BI to communication management. It illustrates how digital technologies can be applied in a value-adding way in communication departments. Additionally, the research elaborates on the process and function of internal communication consulting and extends the inbound dimension of corporate communications (corporate listening) by linking it to internal consulting services.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 *The inbound dimension of corporate communications*

Companies are embedded in their environment and their success is thus dependent on the interests and intentions of their stakeholders. They need to nurture relationships with them to maintain their "social license to operate" (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, p. 25). Maintaining stakeholder relations and securing reputation is often defined as a key task of corporate communications: "Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent" (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 5).

More generally, *corporate communications* "encompasses all communication activities enacted by or on behalf of a business" (Zerfass and Link, 2022, p. 239) and contributes to the internal and external

coordination of actions and to the alignment of interests between companies and their stakeholders (ibid.). Communication departments are business units specializing in the management, controlling and implementation of communications activities within and across the company (Cornelissen, 2023, pp. 28-36). Close integration into the overall organization is necessary to perform the related tasks (Tench *et al.*, 2017, p. 61). Communication departments are staffed with communication professionals who carry out communication activities themselves, support and empower other corporate actors in communication-related tasks, and offer them internal advice on business decisions.

This means that corporate communications can contribute to value creation in quite different ways, e.g., by enabling operations, building intangibles, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023, pp. 201-209; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). In addition to managing and executing communication activities, communication professionals thus contribute to value creation by advising internal clients on public opinion and societal developments and contributing insights from media monitoring and stakeholder relationships to managerial decision-making processes (Volk *et al.*, 2017, p. 18).

This broad range of contributions show that the potential mandate of communication departments and professionals does not only include an *outbound dimension* (corporate messaging, conveyance, speaking). It must be conceptually supplemented by an *inbound dimension* (corporate listening, perception, listening) (Borner and Zerfass, 2018, p. 4). This includes the identification of communicative stimuli, for example in the form of topics or expectations in various public arenas, the interests of stakeholders, as well as their interpretation and integration into decision-making processes of companies, business units, or functions (Borner and Zerfass, 2018). The relevance of the inbound dimension can be described by structuration theory. Following this approach, companies as profit-oriented organizations are recursively and reflexively embedded in social relations (Falkheimer, 2009; Giddens, 1984). As social actors, they are involved in the duality of structuration by themselves producing and reproducing the structures on which they are based (Ortmann *et al.*, 2000, p. 19). Recursive interaction leads to an interactive relationship between companies and their stakeholders, whose specific activities can run counter to each other and require coordination of interests and activities (Borner and Zerfass, 2018).

Thus, influencing decision-making processes (Macnamara, 2014), in addition to building relationships and influencing stakeholder opinions and behavior (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) is an important strategic contribution of communication in management. Companies aiming to integrate stimuli from their environment to align their mission and vision with “what the environment will allow or encourage it to do” (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 117) need to establish an inbound communication process which includes data collection and evaluation as well as internal consultation.

2.2 Internal consulting by communication practitioners

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and internal consulting

Advising has been highlighted as an essential task of communication managers by several communication researchers (Fieseler *et al.*, 2015; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Hamrefors, 2009; Moss *et al.*, 2005; Volk *et al.*, 2017; Zerfass *et al.*, 2021). This has been picked up in current systematizations of communicator roles (Volk *et al.*, 2017). The *Communication Manager Role Grid* comprises eight roles, which were summarized into five roles in later research (Volk *et al.*, 2017; Zerfass *et al.*, 2021, p. 47). Accordingly, communication practitioners can assume the roles of communicator, ambassador, manager, coach, and advisor. The coach and advisor roles are inbound roles that focus on supporting top executives, middle managers, or other members of the organization (Volk *et al.*, 2017). The advisor should have strong knowledge of public debates and developments in societal spheres with strategic relevance, and contribute this into decision-making processes. This helps to identify business opportunities and secure the “license to operate” (Zerfass *et al.*, 2021, pp. 47-69). A review of the advisor role reveals that it is firmly embedded in the communicator’s role set (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Moss *et al.*, 2005; Volk *et al.*, 2017), but the literature rarely elaborates on how communicators in organizations can perform this role. Only occasionally has this role been explored in more depth and the various manifestations specified (Zerfass and Franke, 2013). Thus, to theoretically ground and describe internal consulting by communicators, insights from management consulting must be considered.

Management consulting is formalized and professional consulting based on expertise and knowledge of consulting methods and operational models (Schlüter, 2009, p. 16). Management consulting includes “any form of providing help on the content, process or structure of a task or series of tasks, where the consultant is not actually responsible for doing the task itself but is helping those who are” (Steele, 1975, S. 2-3). The core of a consulting service is the provision of information to support the management of the company (Kubr, 2002, p.17). This knowledge consists of factual knowledge, knowledge of the interrelationships of reality, technological knowledge, and values and norms, and can be related both to the solution of problems and to the implementation of processes (Bamberger and Wrona, 2012, p. 6). In addition to external consulting organization, consulting can also be provided by in-house consulting units and by functional department, such as the communication department, concerning topics within their respective functional area (Zerfass and Franke, 2013, p. 122). In practice and theory, two forms of management consulting are distinguished: expert and process consulting (Kubr, 2002, pp. 70-72). Management consulting fundamentally starts with the idea that an expert gives advice based on his or her expert knowledge and experience and develops concrete solutions to client problems. The second type of consulting is not directly aimed at giving advice but focuses on providing structures and processes to solve a specific problem and support the client’s decision-making ability in a broader sense (Kubr, 2002, p. 72).

Based on the extensive role sets of communication practitioners, Zerfass and Franke (2013, p. 128) describe *internal communication*

consulting as internal expert and process consulting by the communication department. Internal communication consulting refers on the one hand to the communicative dimension of corporate actions. The focus is on communicative actions and problems of executives or employees across the organization, which might be supported by providing media training, giving guidance for social media activities, or content support (Schick, 2007, p. 17) - the coaching aspect. Internal communication consulting can also focus on corporate actions of all kinds which are somehow influenced by or influence public opinion building, reputation, expectations, and shared constructions of reality - the advising aspect. For example, investment decisions, decisions to close production sites or to expand business areas can have a wide range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects on relevant stakeholders (Franke, 2013, p. 104). It can be assumed that internal consultants generate their needed knowledge by performing their other main tasks (Weiss, 2003, p. 3). However, research does not unveil how they can generate the specific knowledge for different consulting objects. Proving specific and relevant expertise is necessary to be recognized as an internal consultant (Zerfass and Franke, 2013, p. 123). The existing literature is lacking ideas on how this evidence can be provided. If one considers internal communication consulting as part of the inbound dimension of communication management, then this is based on insights about public opinions, societal developments, and stakeholders.

2.3 Data-driven corporate communications and business intelligence

While communication processes are increasingly shifting to digital channels, communication management is also increasingly becoming digitalized and based on data (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023). Digitalization as the “sociotechnical process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social and institutional contexts that render digital technologies infrastructural” (Tilson *et al.*, 2010, S. 749) has a strong influence on the way companies interact with their stakeholders and has fundamentally changed the goal setting, development, and evaluation of communication activities (Weiner and Kochar, 2016, p. 17). This is evident in the establishment of digital technologies in corporate communications (Communication Technology, or CommTech for short). Following the term MarTech from marketing, *CommTech* as an umbrella term includes digital technologies, tools, and services that can be used in communication departments (A.W. Page Society, 2019; Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023). Brockhaus *et al.* (2023) draw on the value chain (Porter, 1985), to distinguish between primary and supporting activities, classifying consulting internal clients among the primary activities of the communications department.

Due to the increasing digitalization and datafication of corporate communications, first concepts for data generation from Big Data and social media data have already been introduced in the literature. Wiencierz and Röttger (2019) have developed a concept for processing and analyzing *Big Data* in corporate communications based on the Knowledge Discovery in Databases (KDD) approach, a model commonly used in business informatics that describes how large information assets can be used

efficiently and effectively while systematically uncovering insights (Fayyad *et al.*, 1996). Another aspect that has been researched for some time is *social media analytics*, i.e., the assessment of social media data (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018; Zeng *et al.*, 2010, p. 14).

Business intelligence (BI), on the other hand, has not been discussed in corporate communications research and practice so far. The concept has been developed in business informatics and management research. BI applications are designed to use data assets more efficiently and effectively to make better business decisions (Leung *et al.*, 2013, p. 7) by providing decision makers with quick and convenient access to information. Intelligent decisions based on a comprehensive data and information base are required to ensure the success of the company (Munoz, 2018, p. 3; Olszak, 2016, p. 105). Evelson and Nicolson (2008) define Business Intelligence (BI) as a “set of methodologies, processes, architectures, and technologies that transform raw data into meaningful and useful information [that] allows business users to make informed business decisions with real-time data that can put a company ahead of its competitors” (n.d.).

One of the most cited definitions of BI compares the term to an “umbrella” that describes technologies as well as applications and processes for collecting, storing, accessing, and analyzing data (Adelman and Moss, 2000; Olszak, 2016, p. 107).

The *BI process* is usually broken down into data retrieval, reporting and analysis and distribution. First, data is cleansed of semantic and syntactic errors and integrated into a common data store before it is fed into reporting systems or used to generate information using mathematical-statistical and algorithmic models (Baars and Kemper, 2021, pp. 10-12). Finally, the results are visualized and delivered (Baars and Kemper, 2021, pp. 10-12). The value of BI lies in the provision of applicable knowledge to the user and thus crucially depends on the involvement in decision-making processes (Leung *et al.*, 2013, p. 8; Loshin, 2013, p. 7). Regarding consulting tasks, BI can be used to gain faster access to data and support decisions with a sound information base (Olszak, 2016, p. 119).

3. A framework for internal communication consulting based on business intelligence

The knowledge derived from the interdisciplinary literature analysis above was used to develop a conceptual framework for using business intelligence in internal communication consulting. After developing an initial version of the framework based on insights from corporate communications, consulting, and business information research, qualitative expert interviews were conducted to empirically validate the construct (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2023). The interviewees were communication professionals working in the 500 largest companies in Europe’s largest economy (Germany), sampled on basis of their specific expertise and experience either as data analysts working in corporate communication departments or as chief communication officers and communication business partners, who frequently advise internal stakeholders as part of

their daily job. Industry magazines and posts (e.g., on LinkedIn) were researched to identify those experts. 34 professionals were invited and 9 accepted to engage in the validation study in summer 2022 (26% response rate). The companies in the sample had an annual revenue between 4.2 and 279 billion Euros in 2022. Two interview guidelines with partly overlapping and partly differing questions for data analysts and communication practitioners in advising roles were used to conduct semi-structured interviews. The guidelines were informed by the literature analysis and the draft framework. The average duration of the interviews was 38 minutes; they were transcribed and analyzed with inductive content analysis using MAXQDA software by the lead author. The following sections present the conceptual framework and its theoretical foundations with minor terminological modifications suggested by the interviewees, who generally supported and confirmed the outline.

3.1 Providing internal consulting services in corporate communications

This section focuses on the provision of consulting and advising services by communicators. To this end, internal communication consulting is described from a functional and procedural perspective based on the literature reviewed. This addresses the question how communication practitioners advise internal clients and what added value they generate for them (RQ1).

a) Functional dimensions of internal consulting services by communicators

Considering the increasing popularity of the concept, it is first necessary to differentiate the various functions of internal communication consulting. The functional perspective of management or communication consulting is concerned with the tasks of consultants and the purpose of the consulting process (Kubr, 2002). Internal consulting by communicators differs from consulting in general in two dimensions. Compared to management consulting (either in-house or from external advisors), the subject matter is limited to consulting on the communication-related dimensions of managerial decisions. Compared to external communication consulting, the benefits of adding an impartial view are limited. Taking this into account, four functions of internal communication consulting can be systematized:

- *Knowledge transfer*: Sharing insights, interpretation, and expertise from communication experts with top management and other executives is the primary function of internal communication consulting (Lippold, 2019, p. 18). At the same time, internal consulting generates new knowledge in the communication department (Hoyer, 2000, p. 63).
- *Fostering interaction*: Performing internal consulting services strengthens interactions between communication practitioners and their internal clients, which supports an informal exchange of information across departmental boundaries (Leker *et al.*, 2007, p. 148). This fosters communication across the company and enables stimuli from within the company to be recognized and absorbed more quickly.

- *Organizational development*: Another potential outcome of internal consulting by communicators is influencing attitudes and initiating reflection of clients, which stimulates organizational development and change. This optimizes the overall problem-solving potential of organizations (Wohlgemuth, 1985, p. 82).
- *People development*: By acting as internal consultants, communication practitioners expand their skills and competencies (Hoyer, 2000, p. 61). They gain insights into many areas of the company, take on impulses from various internal actors, and deal with communicative implications of a wide range of managerial challenges (Leker *et al.*, 2007, p. 151).

The functions of fostering interaction, organizational development and people development represent rather indirect functions that are performed through the continuous execution of consulting services. The transfer of knowledge to improve problem solving and business decisions, on the other hand, can be understood as the core strategic contribution of internal consulting in management.

b) *Processual view of internal consulting services by communicators*

Consulting services are provided in an iterative process that can be divided into multiple phases. Those phases differ in terms of the methods and instruments needed and in terms of the necessary information and sources of information (Kubr, 2002, pp. 21-24):

- In the *briefing and goal definition phase*, the fundamental questions for the internal consulting process are clarified. This involves identifying and structuring the problem, clarifying mutual expectations, defining the problem and what expertise is needed (Kolb and Frohman, 1970, p. 55).
- The *analysis and problem-solving phase* begins with a diagnosis of the current situation and the definition of objectives. Subsequently, information is gathered and processed, a conceptual representation of the focal challenge is developed, alternative interpretations and solutions are identified, an action plan is developed, and results are presented (Elfgen and Klaile, 1987, pp. 67-68).
- The *evaluation of results and the collaboration* concludes the consulting process. The evaluation should refer exclusively to the advice given - and not to the implementation of solutions which might have been developed. It will also be necessary to assess the effectiveness and the efficiency of the consulting process (Hafner and Reineke, 1992, p. 70) and the interaction between communicators and their internal clients; not only summative at the end of the project, but also formative during the process (Kubr, 2002, p. 253).

c) *Consulting instruments and data sources*

The provision of consulting services is usually supported by management tools and more standardized consulting products. While consulting products are suitable for recurring and coherent challenges such as the transformation of existing business models, management tools, such as SWOT and stakeholder analyses, are suitable for more specific applications (Lippold, 2019, p. 32; Volk and Zerfass, 2021). The creation of

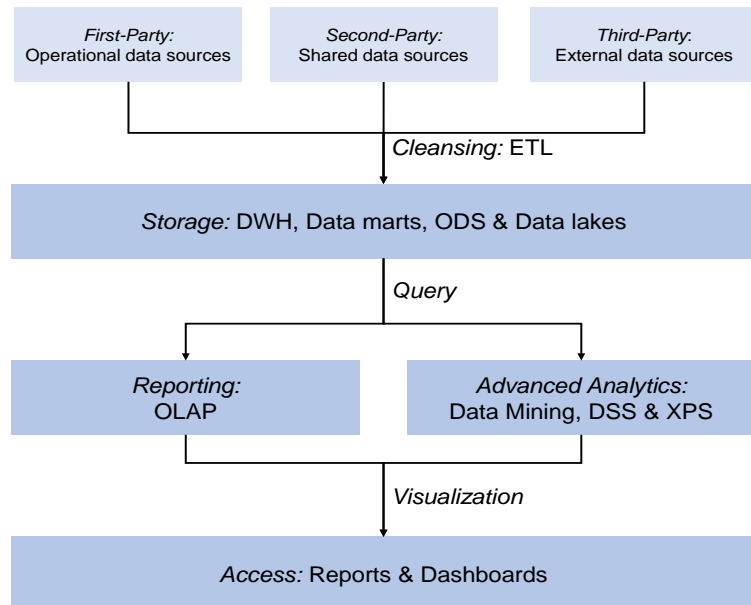
consulting services is usually situation-specific, but aligned with higher-level concepts, such as the stakeholder approach (Freeman, 1984).

The successful use of consulting instruments requires topic-related knowledge. Three forms of data sources for generating topic-related knowledge can be differentiated: Primary data, secondary data, and internal secondary data (Lippold, 2019, p. 265). *Primary data* are collected for the first time specifically for a particular challenge from predetermined sources, e.g., through interviews (Weiner, 2021, p. 66). *Secondary data* are based on existing material that has already been collected for other purposes and are associated with low costs (Weiner, 2021, p. 67). *Internal secondary data* are an important subset that is based on sources already available in the company (Lippold, 2019, p. 266). This is especially important for communicators acting as internal consultants, as they can use data collected through the inbound activities of organizational listening and issues management, including social media analytics, media monitoring, and stakeholder assessments.

3.2 Use of business intelligence for internal consulting in corporate communications

This section will conceptualize the consulting process in more detail by adding insights from the business information systems literature to identify and systematize digital applications, processes, and products that can be applied. This provides an answer to the question of how business intelligence may be used for internal consulting services by communication practitioners (RQ2).

Fig. 1: The three-stage business intelligence concept



Source: Authors elaboration

Based on the literature, a three-stage BI process can be identified consisting of data cleansing and storage, reporting and advanced analytics, and visualization and access (Fig. 1):

a) Data sources and data collection

For internal consulting by communicators, internal secondary data are especially useful. The sources of internal secondary data can be further differentiated into first-, second-, and third-party data (Tench *et al.*, 2017, p. 101; Weiner and Kochhar, 2016, p. 6). *First-party data* is data that a company owns and can control, e.g., information about consumers from a customer relationship management system, or information about journalists from a media relations database. *Second-party data* is shared with other companies or originates from other companies and is available for sharing, e.g., data generated through sponsored events (Weiner and Kochhar, 2016, p. 6). *Third-party data* are external data from various sources outside the company, generated by the company itself or by service providers, e.g., scientific studies or public opinion polls (Wiencierz *et al.*, 2017).

b) Data cleansing and storage

The process of transforming operational and external data into decision-oriented data is a first and crucial step in the BI process. It focuses on transferring data oriented to specific operational applications into topic-oriented data that meet the information needs of decision makers (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 24). It is often referred to as the ETL process, which comprises the substeps extraction, transformation, and loading, i.e., the extraction of data from heterogeneous sources, the transformation and adaptation of the data through reshaping and aggregation to the requirements of the system, and the loading of this data into the storage architecture (Vercellis, 2009, pp. 53-54). Since communication and enterprise data are scattered across many different operational and external systems, this substep is crucial (Sherman, 2014, pp. 8-11).

Data warehouses, data marts, operational data stores, and data lakes for Big Data can be distinguished as storage variants (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 24). A *data warehouse* (DWH) serves as consistent and uniform database for all types of decision support systems (Vercellis, 2009). A *data mart* represents a reduced data pool for certain classes of applications for a restricted group of users (Vercellis, 2009), which can use it to perform analytical evaluations. The filling, maintenance, and use of a DWH, on the other hand, should be carried out exclusively by IT departments (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 37). The data can either be transformed directly from the operational and external source systems into the data marts or first fed into a central, overarching core DWH. Data warehouses and data marts can be extended by an integrated, non-history-forming, *operational data store* (ODS). An ODS is used to provide up-to-date, transaction-oriented data from various source systems (Sherman, 2014, p. 138). In contrast to the DWH, data in the ODS is overwritten when necessary. In addition, a *data lake* is necessary for the processing of Big Data. As a counterpart to the DWH, it resembles an ODS and enables the direct storage of large volumes

of structured and unstructured data (Fang, 2015). The best possible data storage is possible through a combination of a data lake, DWH and, if necessary, data marts, since the latter remain the first choice for consistent storage of structured data (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 85).

c) Reporting and advanced analytics

The second step involves the reporting and analysis of the transformed and stored data. *Online analytical processing* (OLAP) can be used for fast and flexible ad hoc reporting (Chen *et al.*, 2012, p. 1166; Codd *et al.*, 1993). It allows users to view comparative metrics across multiple dimensions based on predefined criteria, which is why OLAP functions continue to be used despite the introduction of more advanced methods such as data mining (Loshin, 2013, p. 113; Olszak, 2016, p. 107). Based on the stored historical data, trends in stakeholder or competitor behavior can be identified and forecasts can be made (Olszak, 2016, p. 110).

Advanced analytics are used to predict future values (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 124). Central to advanced analytics is data mining, which describes the recognition of patterns in data with the goal of generating useful and previously unknown information (Vercellis, 2009, p. 77). Data mining can be defined as “data processing using sophisticated data search capabilities and statistical algorithms to discover patterns and correlations in large preexisting databases” (Princeton University’s Word Net, n.d., n.d.). For this purpose, data mining makes use of various statistical methods as well as machine learning, focusing on algorithmic and mathematical models that have to be developed, maintained, and adapted (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 125). The data mining process can be designed according to the phase sequence of the CRISP-DM standard, which adds the understanding of the business objective and model as the crucial first step (Chapman *et al.*, 2000, p. 29; Piatetsky, 2014). The patterns uncovered by data mining and machine learning methods consist of a formalized description of relationships between two or more of the entities described in a dataset, such as data objects, their attributes, characteristics, and attribute values (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 127).

More sophisticated analyses such as sentiment analysis or opinion mining can be performed using advanced analytics (Baars and Kemper, 2021, pp. 10-12). Clustering, classification, association analysis, and sequence or time series analysis can be differentiated (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 127; Han and Kamber, 2006). The goal of grouping (also called segmentation or cluster analysis) is to decompose a given set into subsets. The objects within a subset should be as similar as possible, whereas the objects of different groups should be as heterogeneous as possible (Han and Kamber, 2006, p. 383). Cluster analyses can be used to identify previously unknown stakeholder relationships. Classification aims to divide the data into specific classes. Stakeholders are to be classified into different classes with regard to a variable based on their data (Han and Kamber, 2006, p. 286). Opinion mining and sentiment analysis are classification methods relevant to internal communication consulting (Van Looy, 2016, p. 133). Association analysis involves working out relationships and dependencies between given objects or attributes and establishing association rules with

the goal to derive logical implications in the form of “Whoever is of opinion A is often also of opinion B” (Han and Kamber, 2006, p. 344). Data mining methods can also be used to predict an unknown characteristic based on past values. This method is particularly relevant for predicting trends (Han and Kamber, 2006, p. 490).

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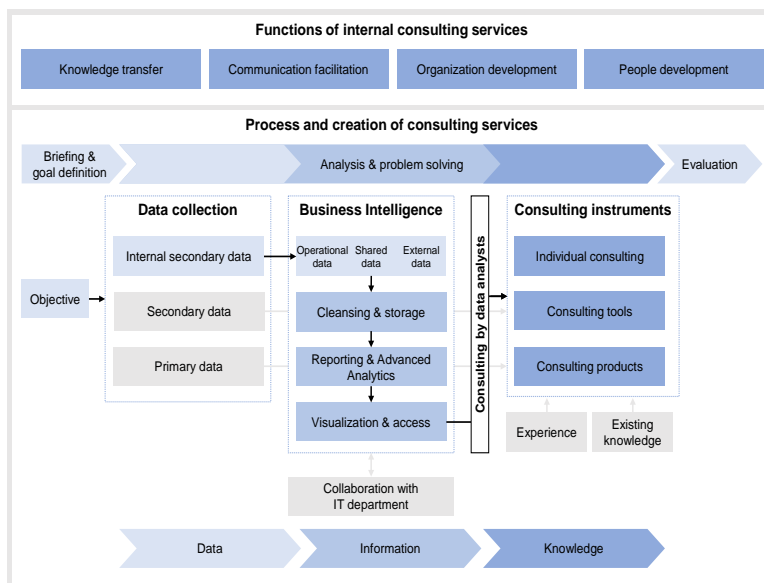
d) Visualization and access

The third step involves visualizing the acquired information using known guidelines and established components (Few, 2009) and providing the information in static presentations and PDFs or interactive dashboards (Zheng, 2018, p. 72). Without appropriate visualization, users can only absorb the information obtained to a limited extent (Zheng, 2018, p. 67). A major advantage of BI technologies is that they can depict the relationship between variables and conclusions in a self-explanatory way. Information design guidelines, such as the SUCCESS rules (Gerths and Hichert, 2013), aim to make information accessible efficiently and effectively, e.g., by demanding the avoidance of trivial, redundant, and embellishing elements (Few, 2009; Gerths and Hichert, 2013; Tufte, 2001). For more sophisticated data mining analyses, specialized visualization elements (visual analytics) like mosaic diagrams, bubble charts and scatterplots can facilitate the comprehension of the subject matter (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 300). Access to the results can be provided in the form of PowerPoint presentations or PDFs. These are suitable for immediate use by the user and offer the possibility of preparing the data for specific target groups (Baars and Kemper, 2021, p. 304). In addition, BI results can be presented in the form of dashboards and analysis tools which arrange the most important information on a screen and allow users to grasp it at a glance (Few, 2006, p. 34; Zheng, 2018, p. 72).

3.3 Summary and framework development

Internal consulting by communication practitioners can support management by highlighting the communicative dimension of business decisions and clarifying their communicative implications. This advice helps to optimize decision-making processes of clients such as top management and other executives. The framework shown in Fig. 2 depicts internal consulting in communication management as a process of leveraging BI applications to generate information from data and to enable knowledge transfer as the essential function of internal communication consulting. This answers the overarching question of how communication practitioners can leverage data-driven business intelligence to support managerial decision-making processes (RQ).

Fig. 2: Service provision through business intelligence in internal communication consulting



Source: Authors elaboration

First and foremost, internal consulting services by communicators serve the purpose of transferring knowledge from monitoring public opinions, social developments and relevant stakeholders to top management and other executives in the organization to support their decision-making. Communication practitioners acting as internal consultants may collect primary data themselves or integrate external secondary data. Many communication departments have access to valuable and company-specific data, but they are seldom able to leverage it to a full extent as they lack the needed processes and technologies. The framework shows that data from operational, shared, and external sources can be transformed into information using a business intelligence process that covers all process phases and the necessary technologies and applications, from cleansing and merging the data to accessing the aggregated information. Robust storage architectures are necessary to enable OLAP reporting and complex analyses using data mining methods. Finally, generated information must be visualized in static reports or dashboards in a targeted manner.

At the core of this process is a two-part consulting service. First, data analysts are needed that help communication practitioners to generate and provide relevant data and insights. For this, they must collaborate with IT specialists and external service providers regarding data collection as well as the setup and maintenance of the BI environment. They must define objectives, monitor processes on an ongoing basis, compare them with previous assumptions, and, above all, classify results and derive instructions for action. Second, based on the situational knowledge gained through the BI process, communication practitioners can create valuable internal

consulting services using consulting instruments in combination with their professional expertise, contextual and methodological knowledge, experience, and critical thinking (Weiner, 2021, p. 73). All interviewees emphasized both phases of the consulting processes. Data analysts stressed their advisory role within the communication department and the necessity of collaborating with IT specialists. Chief Communication Officers and Communication Business Partners, however, focused more on the complexity of advising other members of the organization that cannot solely be achieved by using data and digital tools - personal competencies, acceptance and relationships are important as well.

Today's data storage technologies as well as the power of analytical methods such as data-driven scenario techniques provide many opportunities. However, the importance of a precise framing of the information throughout internal consulting processes must not be underestimated. Any BI process requires early and realistic goal formulations, cross-departmental collaboration, and a culture of knowledge sharing. Another central prerequisite for a successful BI process is the establishment of data-conscious work routines among communication practitioners. This can be achieved by emphasizing the added value of working with data, providing training on how to use data in daily practice, and linking personal goals and incentives to data-based activities. Last but not least, a data-conscious culture in communication departments is needed to leverage the full potential of business intelligence in corporate communications.

4. Conclusion and implications

To deliver valuable advice to management in a deeply mediatized world, communication practitioners must draw on data-driven insights on public opinions, social developments and relevant stakeholders. The necessary information can be gathered in various ways. Business intelligence concepts support this by collecting and processing data using digital technologies to support decision-making. This can be combined with the experience, intuition, and existing knowledge of communication professionals to form a solid basis for an internal consulting process. It enables practitioners to bring the communicative dimension into managerial decision-making and align organizations with their "social context and with the most relevant expectations of most relevant stakeholders" (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015, p. 218).

The framework presented in this article is based on a thorough analysis of interdisciplinary literature. Expert interviews with chief communication officers and data analysts from major companies in a leading business nation have confirmed its structure and helped to optimize the wording where needed. Nevertheless, a limitation of this research is that the framework has not been discussed in several countries and organizations of varying size. Moreover, the empirical application of the framework could not be tested so far, as integrating BI in communication management is still an emerging practice.

For future research, developing use cases and evaluating real-life applications through qualitative studies would be a worthwhile endeavor. This article also lays ground for a more detailed exploration of the internal consulting role in communication management. A deeper investigation of how and to which extent giving advice is practiced by communication practitioners to influence managerial decisions is needed. This includes questions about the competencies (knowledge, skills, personal attributes) of professionals (Tench *et al.*, 2017, pp. 135-152) and about future-proof business models for communication departments in the age of artificial intelligence (Zerfass and Link, 2024).

Last but not least, analyzing the use of BI processes beyond internal consulting may open up new avenues for research. Other tasks of practitioners such as measuring and evaluating corporate communications or governing a communication department also require data that can be provided by business intelligence. This can significantly change the entire management of communication departments - something that is rarely discussed in the academic debate on digitalization, which tends to focus on stakeholder communication and channels (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023). When doing so, it has to be taken into account that corporate communications is neither exclusively concerned with big data streams nor with goals that can always be substantiated with quantifiable performance indicators. Strategic decisions are based on information and expertise, complemented by ambitious leaders who take personal responsibility for managing businesses in uncertain times.

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Bridging corporate communication and marketing narratives for organizational success: how collaboration happens

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *This research adopts a multistakeholder approach to investigate how corporate communication and marketing link and overlap to deal with new pressing challenges in business and society. Under a multistakeholder perspective, these two functions, traditionally defined with their own clear and definitive goals, must work together. While the beneficial effects of such cooperation are clear in theory, there are a number of practical issues to be looked at and solved to favour effective value co-creation.*

Purpose of the paper: *Our paper aims to outline clear boundaries and effective overlaps between corporate communication and marketing in terms of tasks, target audience, media usage, and message contents to explore whether and how synergistic collaboration between the two functions is needed and works in multinational enterprises (MNEs). We will identify which situational contexts, topics, and trends favor or prevent managers' collaboration and interaction. In doing that, we will also outline the main driving forces and challenges.*

Methodology: *We employed a qualitative approach, incorporating focus groups and elite interviews with corporate communication and marketing executives from multinational enterprises across various industries.*

Findings: *The paper's findings outline the strategic relevance of corporate communication in guiding corporate strategies and actions, the integration between corporate communication and marketing in defending brand reputation, and the support of corporate communication to marketing in reformulating advertising campaigns according to a multi-stakeholder perspective.*

Research limitations: *Although our findings have been validated among a variety of industries and their representative leaders, they are still based on a limited sample of MNEs, so their generalizability may be limited.*

Practical implications: *We provide several practical suggestions to corporate communication and marketing managers on how to establish proactive and long-term collaborations between the functions by aligning the strategic planning of marketing actions and corporate communication toward a multi-stakeholder perspective.*

Originality of the paper: *Based on empirical observations, our paper provides new insights into how integrating corporate communication and marketing can enhance strategic and multi-stakeholder significance.*

Key words: *corporate communication; marketing; reputation; multi-stakeholder approach; holistic purpose.*

1. Introduction

As the business environment becomes more complex and interconnected with societal expectations, firms increasingly adopt a new holistic purpose focusing on social, environmental, and economic improvements (Freeman, 2017). This has led to the evolution of business functions and their responsibilities, including marketing and corporate communication. On the one hand, marketing scholars advocate for marketing to provide genuine value to customers through engaging and creating value for multiple internal and external stakeholders (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Pfajfar *et al.* 2022; American Marketing Association, 2017; 2022), therefore creating challenges for a business function that has been traditionally purely oriented to customers and shareholders for a long time (Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, communication scholars recognize that corporate communication is evolving from being just a support function for brand values and message delivery (Birkerton, 2000) to playing a pivotal role in shaping firms' success based on integrated value creation with multiple stakeholders (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Siano, 2012; Van Ruler, 2020). In this regard, exploring the intricate interplay between communication and organizations' strategic objectives is fundamental (Balmer and Gray, 1999; Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011) and, particularly nowadays, supporting the marketing strategic and tactical shift toward a multi-stakeholder orientation becomes urgent and relevant, both theoretically and practically (Belasen and Belasen, 2019; Joshi and Yadav, 2018; Lane Keller, 2019; Porcu *et al.*, 2020). In this context, it is no longer viable to craft compelling marketing campaigns in isolation from the broader corporate communication strategy; instead, these two domains must be seamlessly interlinked to increase and protect corporate image and brand reputation to remain robust and resilient in a dynamic, multi-stakeholder, and digital era.

However, while, theoretically, striving for an effective synergy between marketing and corporate communication is vital (Illia and Balmer, 2012), strong emphasis must be put on the effectiveness of collaboration and interaction between functions, as there is a potential risk of misalignment and overlapping in practice (Cornelissen, 2004; p.115); that is why navigating the terrain requires caution. An incorrect overlap between marketing and corporate communication can weaken corporate and brand reputation and destroy value for the firm and its stakeholders.

Indeed, marketing and corporate communication are separate business functions with different aims and languages (OCIP, 2023). On the one hand, communication managers speak to a broader audience formed by citizens (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Siano, 2012) by employing a more rational, strategic, and information-based language. On the other hand, through a more emotional narrative, marketing communications target customers to align them with organizations' products, services, and ideas (Porcu *et al.*, 2020). Then, a question arises as to whether and how these two functions, with apparent clear domains and evolving strategic significance within firms and corporate culture (Kitchen and Schultz, 2011; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014), integrate by blurring the boundaries to support each other

in creating multi-stakeholder value and meet a more holistic business purpose (Illia and Balmer, 2012).

Therefore, our paper aims to outline clear boundaries and effective overlaps between corporate communication and marketing regarding target audience, media, and message contents to explore whether and how synergistic collaboration between the two functions is needed and works in multinational enterprises (MNEs). We will identify which situational contexts, topics, and trends favor or prevent managers' collaboration and interaction. In doing that, we will also outline the main driving forces and challenges.

To meet our research aim, we conduct two focus groups with sixteen top corporate communication and marketing managers of five MNEs operating in the automotive, food and beverage, and service industries and deepen the subject by interviewing through semi-structured elite interviews technique conducted face-to-face two top marketing managers and two top corporate communication managers selected among the sample.

Our findings first outline that corporate communication strategically guides corporate strategies and actions. Second, we demonstrate that corporate communication and marketing integration is needed when defending brand reputation. Third, our findings reveal that corporate communication supports marketers in reformulating advertising campaigns according to a multi-stakeholder perspective.

Through our findings, we wish to foster the debate about how corporate communication can boost both strategic and tactical managerial decisions (Belasen and Belasen, 2019) and provide early insights about how integrating corporate communication and marketing can strengthen firms' roles as social actors (Siano, 2012; Illia and Balmer, 2012; Aksoy *et al.*, 2022).

Our findings allow the discussion of current and future implications for marketing and corporate communication managers to clarify the domains of responsibility of the two functions and shed light on the key role of collaborative interactions between managers with different backgrounds applied to different contexts. Theoretically, we strengthen the idea that corporate communication plays a key role in supporting the definition and deployment of corporate and business strategies at its core and that marketing, in its new configuration, can only operate with the validation and endorsement of corporate communication. Such a view contrasts with ideologies - which appear to be quite popular, especially among practitioners - positing that one function is more relevant and compelling than the other (Illia and Balmer, 2012) and supports that integrating the two perspectives should be a top strategic priority.

The remainders of the paper unfold as follows. Sections 2 and 3 discuss the theoretical background of corporate communication as a strategic function and marketing as an evolving discipline under the lens of a multi-stakeholder approach. Section 4 describes the adopted mixed qualitative methodology based on focus groups and elite interviews. Section 5 reports the findings from focus groups, and the triangulation of elite interviews and theoretical background supports our discussion. Eventually, we conclude

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with theoretical and managerial implications, which open the avenues for further research.

2. Corporate communication: a strategic and multi-stakeholder function

The transformation of corporate communication's role within organizations, from its initial ancillary position to its current status as a vital strategic function, reflects a profound shift in how businesses perceive and prioritize communication management. Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) have observed that communication was often relegated to the periphery of organizational decision-making processes for years. However, the strategic importance of effective communication has become increasingly evident over time. This shift did not happen overnight; it was a gradual process that required communication managers to assert their value and relevance at the organizational board level since corporate communication evolved into a critical pillar of corporate strategy (Cornelissen, 2004; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Baccarani and Golinelli, 2015; Van Ruler, 2020).

In particular, Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004) noted how communication and marketing were closely intertwined, with communication supporting the delivery of marketing messages to external audiences. However, as the business landscape grew more complex, marked by a focus on how firms act sustainably (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), increased stakeholder scrutiny, and the rise of digital media, the need for strategic communication became undeniable (Van Ruler, 2020). Organizations recognized that communication needed to encompass a broader array of functions, including reputation management (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004), crisis communication (Coombs, 2020), and stakeholder engagement (Romenti, 2010; Romenti *et al.*, 2022). This change has made communication a crucial factor, more independent, interdependent, and prominent, in cultivating and safeguarding an organization's reputation, shaping its values, and representing its worth (Heide *et al.*, 2020; Romenti *et al.*, 2022). Internal and external communications are essential in building, preserving, and enhancing an organization's reputation (Casalegno, 2023; Romoli Venturi *et al.*, 2022; Casalegno and Civera, 2016). Effective corporate communication reinforces stakeholder perception of an organization's commitment to sustainability and responsible corporate citizenship when integrated effectively (Romoli Venturi *et al.*, 2022). Communicating an organization's sustainability practices and achievements to stakeholders enhances its reputation as a socially responsible entity, in line with the principles of corporate social performance (Palazzo *et al.*, 2020). This alignment between communication, sustainability, and reputation strengthens stakeholder trust and enhances the organization's standing as a good corporate citizen, as Mirvis and Googins highlighted in 2006.

The evolution of communication within organizations, from its ancillary role to its current strategic significance, is inextricably linked to adopting a

multi-stakeholder approach (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Varey, 2010). Indeed, as articulated by Stakeholder Theory (ST) scholars (Freeman *et al.*, 2010), the multi-stakeholder perspective posits that organizations do not exist in isolation; instead, they are embedded in a complex system of relationships with various stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, communities, and regulatory bodies. This perspective underscores the idea that creating wholly valid and effective communication without a robust understanding of and preparedness for the multi-stakeholder landscape is impossible. The multi-stakeholder approach also needs a broader view of organizational communication. It extends communication beyond mere promotion and marketing efforts to encompass reputation management, ethical conduct, social responsibility, and sustainability practices (Civera *et al.*, 2018; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Casalegno, 2023).

Effective communication can shape perceptions, promote collaboration, establish relationships, and facilitate internal and external decision-making, aiming to ensure that responsible decisions are made (Morsing and Schultz, 2006) and enhance and protect both corporate image and brand reputation (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) by engaging stakeholders through constant dialogue (Greenwood and VanBuren III, 2010). Therefore, corporate communication and marketing aims seem to converge, given that brand reputation enhancement belongs, by definition, to marketers because of its significant influence on brand equity (Joshi and Yadav, 2018).

3. Marketing: between misperceptions and multi-stakeholder approach

Over the years marketing scholars have outlined key traditional marketing criticisms, applied to its myopic and dichotomous value creation process and the consequent stakeholders' misperceptions (Bhattacharya and Korschun, 2008; Cluley, 2016; Dalsace and Markovitch, 2009; Kashif *et al.*, 2018; Lacznik and Murphy, 2012; Marino *et al.*, 2020; Sheth *et al.*, 2006). The theoretical thinking of stakeholder theorists has greatly affected also the marketing discipline over time: ST scholars have particularly considered traditional marketing processes as short-sighted and static (Freeman *et al.*, 2010) and argued that this has led to negative and sometimes incorrect perceptions and criticisms of marketing as a business discipline (Kachersky and Lerman, 2013), reducing its credibility (Marino *et al.*, 2020).

The criticisms moved by ST and marketing scholars to traditional marketing processes are mainly centered on a purely firm-centric nature of traditional marketing anchored to profit maximization, with a one-way focus on customers, ignoring other stakeholders involved in the social, environmental, and economic contexts as well as their role in creating value (Bhattacharya and Korschun, 2008; Lacznik and Murphy, 2012). Such a perspective perpetuated the so-called silos thinking (Kull *et al.*, 2016), which does not allow marketing managers to interpret impacts, risks, and benefits arising from the interdependent relationships with and between all other stakeholder groups (Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015).

In the current complex business landscape, however, there is a growing need to adopt more human, stakeholder-based, participatory, and

integrated forms of business thinking that encompass economic, social, and environmental value creation in marketing (Fry and Polonsky, 2004), creating a fertile ground for its conceptual and practical evolution.

In the same attempt, for instance, Philip Kotler moves from a marketing conceptualization that puts customers at the center of the marketing value creation process (2003) to postulating that a human-centric approach drives marketing objectives beyond merely selling to customers (2022). He advocates for a deeper understanding of customers by considering their humanity, values, desires, and pain points because of the increasing stakeholder overlapping in a highly complex society that relies on stakeholders' interconnectedness (Casalegno *et al.*, 2020; McVea and Freeman, 2005). This approach encourages companies to build customer relationships rather than merely engaging them in concluding transactions. Kotler emphasizes the importance of adapting marketing strategies to the changing dynamics of the business environment. The traditional 4 Ps' framework of Product, Price, Place, and Promotion is no longer considered sufficient, and a more holistic approach to both strategies and tactics is needed (Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015). Thus, marketing scholars position marketing as a social force with the power to improve firms' communities and engage broader groups of stakeholders because customers have multiple roles in society (Aksoy, 2022; Hult *et al.*, 2011; Sheth *et al.*, 2006).

Coherently with stakeholder thinking, a stream of marketing scholars have argued that companies that include and engage various stakeholder groups within the marketing value creation process are more likely to determine intended and unplanned consequences of marketing actions (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Fry and Polonsky, 2004; Heath *et al.*, 2017; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Sheth *et al.*, 2007).

Not surprisingly, in 2013 (confirmed, then, in 2017), the American Marketing Association (AMA) reworked the definition of marketing, expanding the boundaries of the value creation process without, of course, questioning the centrality, along with other stakeholder groups, of consumers: "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large". Including customers, partners (a group with stakeholders linked to the company by a long-term relationship based on trust), and society at large reflects a clear stakeholder orientation within the marketing value creation process.

The need to make the marketing approach consistent with the multi-stakeholder orientation has resulted in the development of a discipline named Stakeholder Marketing. In 2011, Hult and his colleagues defined it as "the set of activities within a system of social institutions and processes to facilitate and maintain value creation through exchange relationships with multiple stakeholders" (p. 57). Thus, marketing managers must recognize that the value creation perspective of marketing should extend to a plurality of stakeholders to include the interdependent relationships that permeate the ecosystem. This can transform marketing value creation processes, making them impactful for the firm, customers, and the context.

In this sense, the evolutionary and multi-stakeholder marketing process is understood as a social force that integrates business and society (Sheth *et al.*, 2006). It is charged with the power and responsibility to influence the well-being of the ecosystem. This is the most innovative aspect of stakeholder marketing, which accommodates and adapts to corporate responsibility practices naturally and coherently; an aspect that scholars have deemed necessary to investigate since 2008 (Bhattacharya and Korschun, 2008) and which still requires theoretical and practical investigation, to understand how the impact of marketing actions on stakeholders echoes in the entire stakeholder ecosystem, thus in the industry and society (Civera and Freeman, 2019).

Corporate Marketing, as a distinct branch of marketing research focused mainly on corporate brand (Balmer, 2008; 2011), has already fully embedded such a perspective by being conceptualized as having “an explicit institutional, stakeholder, societal orientation and CSR/ethical ethos” (Illia and Balmer, 2012; p. 423; Balmer, 2011). This resonates with the need for traditional marketing to actualize such a corporate philosophy and stakeholder culture - more coherently with the corporate and corporate marketing communication goals - in their goods and services, advertising, and distribution processes, which, growingly, need to respond to multi-stakeholder instances, rather than just customers’ (Bhattacharya and Korschun 2008; Porcu *et al.*, 2020).

In this context, marketing, which traditionally focused merely on product promotion, must increasingly rely on corporate communication to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with stakeholders while creating customer value. The synergistic relationship between marketing and corporate communication has come to the forefront, highlighting the need for these functions to work together effectively to fulfill their respective strategic and tactical roles.

Therefore, we aim to explore whether and how synergistic and collaborative processes between corporate communication and marketing work in the context of MNEs.

4. Marketing and Corporate Communication

The evolution of marketing mentioned above indicates a closer connection with the corporate communication function. This puts significant pressure on the role and tasks of corporate communication on multiple levels. First, it affects the target of communication messages. To provide genuine value to customers and engage multiple internal and external stakeholders, the target audience of marketing broadens and overlaps with that of corporate communication (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2022; American Marketing Association, 2017; 2022). That is the case, for instance, of employer branding strategies and activities, where marketing and corporate communication - and human resource management - integrate their efforts to engage and align talents’ and employees’ values with the overarching brand narrative since they are recognized as the main brand ambassadors (Mishra *et al.*, 2014; Suomi *et*

al., 2021). Second, regarding the channels of communication messages. As marketing channels have expanded to include digital and social media platforms in an omnichannel logic, transparent, homogeneous, and consistent communication with customers and stakeholders has become increasingly relevant (Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, corporate communication and marketing are closely related, with corporate communication serving as the strategic conduit through which marketing messages are conveyed and relationships are nurtured (Cornelissen, 2004; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Finne and Grönroos, 2009). Third, regarding the contents, such as keywords, of communication messages. Given that new frontiers of marketing entail that the contents of marketing messages are appealing and persuasive to customers while having multiple stakeholders as a critical audience (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009), new meanings and values that integrate broader stakeholders' issues should become a core part of marketing communication contents and tone of voice (Lane Keller, 2019; Porcu *et al.*, 2020). A marketing language that emphasizes stakeholder-centered topics such as sustainable development, social well-being, ethics, humanity, and responsibility beyond just emotions (Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Lacznik and Murphy, 2012; Villarino and Font, 2015) needs the validation and endorsement of a more informative tone of voice typical of corporate communication, to create coordinated messages that prevent any misperceptions that may arise among stakeholders, as they might see the brand as inauthentic (Hewlett and Lemon, 2018).

5. Methodology

To accomplish our goal, we employ a qualitative methodological approach based on focus groups (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993) and semi-structured elite interviews (Bernard, 1988; Harvey, 2011). The focus group methodology provides in-depth information thanks to interactive discussions and original ideas through brainstorming (Goldman, 1962; Morgan and Kreuger, 1993). Furthermore, it enriches the conversation about the topic by allowing the observation of group dynamics when participants relate to discussing the topic (Cousins, 2009). It has been assessed as beneficial for our study since both the moderators and the group members are particularly interested in the proposed subject and are mindful of the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions expressed during the research period (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993).

We conducted two rounds of focus groups in October 2023 and November 2023, each lasting 95 minutes and 112 minutes.

Participants were combined in an organized manner based on the research topics they had to deal with and provided their perspectives and opinions, leveraging the advantages of their professional experience (Gibbs, 1997). That is why group members were recruited to include executives of corporate communications and executives of marketing departments in equal amounts, per each of the five selected multinational companies based in Italy. In particular, given the complexity of the MNEs' organizational structure based on global-regional-country-brand levels,

we selected participants from the corporate communication function who have responsibilities at a country level (in our case, Italy) and the executives of the marketing department who deal with specific products or product lines' brands, to more effectively understand and outline synergistic interactions between corporate and marketing strategies and tactics. To gather diverse perspectives, we chose participants from five leading medium-sized and large Italian MNEs operating in the automotive (2), the food and beverage (2), and the business service industry (1) in the B2C sector for the manufacturing enterprises and the B2B for the business service company. We opted for this choice for two main reasons. First, organizationally speaking, in medium-sized and large MNEs, marketing and corporate communication are typically two distinct strategic areas; therefore, their roles and responsibilities are effectively observable. Second, on the one hand, the selected industries are amongst the largest manufacturing industries within the European landscape (Eurostat, 2021), and the business service company is representative of the B2B sector in a growing service field of sustainability and digitalization for value co-creation in the B2B service marketing (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023).

Two leading co-authors moderated the focus groups via Microsoft Teams conference call to understand whether and how corporate communication and marketing managers interact and collaborate around different issues that arise in the company.

Therefore, the discussions were conducted using pre-defined tracks (Goldman, 1962), and a guide based on three scenarios was set up according to the theoretical assumptions presented above, positing more effective synergies between corporate communication and marketing functions. We, therefore, asked participants to begin their discussions by presenting the following hypothetical and yet very practical situations: 1) the need to revise the corporate communication strategy to clarify values to their stakeholders; this served as a starting point to argue whether and how corporate communication increases its strategic importance and provides guidance to corporate strategies and actions (Illia and Balmer, 2012); 2) the need to deal with a brand reputation issue and take action; this functioned as an argument to debate about whether and how synergistic collaboration between corporate communication and marketing happens when brand reputation issues arise (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004; Aksoy *et al.*, 2022); 3) the need to restructure the advertising strategy for a core brand; this served as a starting point to investigate whether and how marketing collaborate with corporate communication to reformulate advertising, according to a multi-stakeholder marketing perspective (Bhattacharya and Kkorschun 2008; Porcu *et al.*, 2020). The two leading co-authors moderated the sessions based on such scenarios to collect managers' views on whether and how corporate communication and marketing create synergies to deal with the proposed three issues.

The first focus group involved eight members: One executive of corporate communication (coded as CC1, CC2, CC3, CC4) and one executive of the marketing department (coded as M1, M2, M3, M4) representing 4 MNEs in the automotive (2 MNEs) and food and beverage industry (2 MNEs). The second focus group involved eight members, different from those selected

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during the first focus groups, to enhance the coverage and the effectiveness of results: One executive of corporate communication (CC5, CC6, CC7, CC8) and one executive of the marketing department (M5, M6, M7, M8) representing 4 MNEs operating in the automotive (1, same company as the first focus group), food and beverage (2, same companies as the first focus group) and business service industry (1).

Furthermore, to clarify the more or less synergistic processes and tactics that emerged from the focus groups, we conducted four online semi-structured elite interviews (Bernard, 1988; Harvey, 2011) in October 2023. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviewees were selected from the focus group participants in the figure of two heads of corporate communication and two heads of marketing departments in the automotive and food and beverage industries.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded with the consent of all participants, transcribed verbatim, and kept secure in a folder protected by the leading co-authors' laptops.

6. Findings and discussion

This section discusses the responses gathered through focus groups around the three proposed scenarios, supported by opinions and perspectives collected from the elite interviews.

Each scenario allowed us to discuss the boundaries between marketing and corporate communication in terms of tasks, audience, media usage, message contents (including the tone of voice), and situations of overlaps and synergy between the two functions by outlining specific driving forces and challenges of collaboration.

6.1 Strategic relevance of corporate communication in guiding corporate strategies and actions

Scenario 1 was presented to the participants of both focus groups to gather their perceptions about the process adopted to revise the corporate communication strategy and clarify key values for the stakeholders. The interactions in focus groups 1 and 2 began with CC1, CC2, and CC6 intervening first to clarify the complexities of MNEs' organizational structure, making it harder for interactions between marketing and corporate communication managers to happen smoothly. This appeared quite obvious by observing a group dynamic, for instance, in the very first salutation between CC2 and M2, who, despite being part of the same MNE and supposedly being required to work together, greeted each other as follows "Hi! It has been quite a long while!". Surprised by what it signaled as a perceived distance between the two participants, we started by involving them in describing the adopted process to revise the corporate communication strategy. In particular, CC2 outlined complexities based on different domains that separate corporate communication - which provides the guidelines for the strategy revision from a global perspective - from brand marketing communication - which enacts such guidelines

coherently with the market's expectations. CC6 from focus group 2 confirms the same: "As corporate communication managers, we have the task of setting a new strategy about how to deliver correct messages to build and protect the image of our corporate brand". CC4 strengthened the assertion: "Of course, guidelines to keep consistency among the different levels of communication should be delivered even to marketers." However, despite marketers not rejecting this opinion, M4 added that the marketing function needs to keep the pulse of the situation on markets and to follow trends, fads, and predilections, keeping daily relationships with customers at the core of their priorities, even if in contrast with the long term communication strategy, because: "in the end, results matter!" (M4, focus group 1).

However, during focus groups, some opinions shed light on how corporate communication and marketing are evolving and sometimes integrating to decide on approaching the market in line with core values and society's expectations. This is where social responsibilities force a greater synergy between corporate communication and marketing, even if marketing results are apparently compromised. For instance, M2 drew attention to a specific product campaign in which they strategically decided to discontinue the production of a particular color. Although this color is still the most requested on the market and customers keep asking for it, it reminds the human mind of the monotonous and lifeless aspects of existence, which the corporate strategy aims to avoid. This marketing strategy was implemented in line with corporate communication guidelines and the goal of sharing more colored human values, which are essential for both corporate and product brands. The elite interview with M2 allowed for a more comprehensive discussion of such a case, outlining that, despite the marketing manager tended to present their function as more predominant than corporate communication, in the name of environmental and human-based values driving societal expectations nowadays, each of the two functions must align. Corporate communication strengthens its role as a strategic guide for corporate strategies and actions. This confirms the increasingly strategic role of corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2004; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Van Ruler, 2020) as crucial in shaping an organization's values and representing its worth to all the stakeholders (Heide *et al.*, 2020; Romenti *et al.*, 2022), especially when societal expectations, linked to human values for instance, exert pressures on organizations and their markets (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Porcu *et al.*, 2020).

The case discussed by M2 sheds light on a balanced synergy between corporate communication and marketing in the interest of social responsibilities, where there is no strategic predominance of one of the two functions. This result is confirmed by CC8 and M8, who argued that their corporate communication strategy has changed upon various inputs from digital marketing that reported confusion about the product and its values in the market and its societies. Accordingly, corporate communication and marketing strengthened their synergies and restructured the corporate communication strategy based on clearer information sharing about product values. This is where corporate communication serves as strategic guidance for adapting the language and the content of marketing

messages, stemming from the awareness that stakeholders' roles overlap (Casalegno *et al.*, 2020; McVea and Freeman, 2005). Indeed, as M1 posited: "Customers are citizens, and corporate communication must support us in a new multi-stakeholder approach".

6.2 Corporate communication and marketing collaborate in defending brand reputation

Scenario 2 was presented to the participants of both focus groups to gather perceptions about the need to deal with brand reputation issues and take action. In this case, we noticed a greater willingness from corporate communicators to share their experiences. This perfectly aligns with the literature, which links corporate communication actions to the building and the protection of the brand's (both corporate and product) reputation (Argenti and Drukenmiller, 2004; Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Candelo *et al.*, 2019). Even during this scenario, CC1 and M1 in focus group 1 began the discussion by mentioning a specific situation when their MNE had to deal with a potential crisis in a product's brand reputation. To anticipate the risk of such a potential crisis that was hitting most of the food and beverage industry brands in 2016, the marketing department of the product's brand and the corporate communication opted for closer collaboration by designing a cross-functional strategy. That was to safeguard, in particular, one of their flagship brands by communicating that products would not have removed one ingredient - even though the public was asking to do so - by demonstrating and explaining to the audiences that it was not harmful to people and the environment because the MNE as a whole used certified supply and processes to extract and produce it: "Our renowned corporate reputation helped to protect our product brand, it is a matter of credibility. Since we were (and still are) sure to be right, while all our competitors removed that ingredient, we did not, and we were proven right in the end." (CC1). The strategy was based on various media and communication tools, resulting in different approaches. Corporate communication relied on PR and media relations, while marketing used advertising and labeling. In corporate communication, an informative and scientific tone was used, whereas marketing required a persuasive and engaging tone to reach the target market effectively.

In focus group 2, CC7 and M7 declared that marketing and corporate communication should always work together around critical topics that might affect brand reputation in ethics and sustainability. However, as M7 stated: "Sometimes we tailor specific marketing actions to protect our brand reputation by cooperating directly with the CSR function". The fact that marketing, in this case, avoids synergy with corporate communication and interacts directly with the sustainability/CSR function is discussed by CC7 as a major flaw in building a holistic and coherent brand and corporate reputation, operating against the integration of voices, as described by CC7, CC1, and CC8, that any organization aims at. This highlights a criticism that scholars have already recognized as key to addressing to prevent possible damage to brand reputation when corporate communication and marketing act as separate voices (Hewlett and Lemon, 2018).

Accordingly, both elite interviews conducted with CC1 and CC7 outlined the strategic importance of corporate communication when dealing with brand reputation issues, highlighting possible struggles for two orders of reasons. The first one relates to the above and refers to situations in which marketing autonomously decides to take actions by involving directly other functions rather than corporate communication, such as sustainability. This also emerged from the discussions during focus group 1, when CC2 explained that a marketing campaign centered on sustainability through a famous testimonial - an environmental activist - was conducted autonomously by the marketing department with successful results in terms of product brand reputation. In CC2's opinion, the campaign would have sorted better effects for the whole corporate reputation if marketing had involved corporate communication, at least in the choice of the testimonial, also considering the opportunity linked to an activist given that the industry is affected by negative stakeholders' perception about sustainability impacts. The second refers to the lower budget that corporate communication can dispose of compared to marketing. This aspect was also argued during the first focus group when CC4, because of lower budgeting, even defined corporate communication's role in brand reputation issues as subordinate and sometimes underestimated.

However, marketers in both focus groups, particularly M4, M5, and M8, pointed out that marketing and corporate communication have precise responsibility domains in dealing with brand reputation issues: it is the responsibility of the marketing function to gather perspectives and insights from the market, thanks to an omnichannel presence and, according also to CC5, corporate communication dictates the guidelines especially in crisis moments when it must coordinate the various messages to prevent a fragmented brand image, confirming Hewlett and Lemon's view (2018).

6.3 *Corporate communication supports marketing in reformulating advertising campaigns according to a multi-stakeholder perspective*

Scenario 3 was presented to the participants of both focus groups to gather insights about the process implemented when marketers need to reformulate an advertising strategy for a core brand. The interactions in focus groups 1 and 2 were more linear than in the other two scenarios. They began with marketers 5 and 6 in focus group 2, for instance, arguing that compelling storytelling for a new advertising campaign should be written synergistically with the corporate communication team, especially to avoid some misperceptions related to marketing (i.e., around packaging, production processes) when including key topics such as sustainability and ethics in advertising campaigns. The need to collaborate and be endorsed by corporate communication was identified as strategic in choosing a language that, although emotion-based, should now incorporate some informational keywords according to a multi-stakeholder approach that used to belong merely to corporate communication.

This confirms the view of scholars supporting an evolution of marketing toward a multi-stakeholder approach and engagement (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya and Kkorschun, 2008; Fry and Polonsky, 2004; Heath *et al.*, 2017; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Sheth *et al.*, 2007).

This is also confirmed by M7 in the élite interview, who described that the 2021 advertising campaign launched by their marketing team operating in the food and beverage industry fully integrated the corporate sustainable values into the product. This, in turn, allowed positive impacts on all the business functions, including corporate communication, sustainability, and marketing. Indeed, differently to what happened in the situation described in scenario 2 by CC2, CC7 highlights that thanks to the synergistic work underlying the campaign, the corporate communication used the same testimonial with the same messages for a coherent spreading of sustainable values also at a corporate level.

Eventually, C8 and M8 agree that when corporate communication and marketing are synchronized, the brand's values are effectively conveyed in the advertising campaigns. This ensures that there is no risk of compromising the brand values while maintaining creativity in the advertising, and it can also lower the risk of misperceptions.

7. Concluding remarks

- Our main findings emerge according to each scenario and suggest that:
- Corporate communication has a predominant strategic relevance in revising the corporate strategy according to sustainable values, while marketing's task is to keep the market's pulse and inform about customers and citizens' rising new concerns and expectations. The two functions are keener to operate in synergy when sustainable values (environmental, human-based, and responsibility issues) need to be embedded in the corporate strategy and communicated accordingly. In this regard, we outline a central challenge for the marketing function, as the short-term results might be compromised to establish and communicate a wholly sustainable and purpose-driven long-term corporate strategy.
 - Marketing and corporate communication establish synergic relationships and major overlaps are detected when firms are called to protect their brand reputation in situations of potential reputational crises. That is when, even though corporate communicators have the task of coordinating various messages and marketers need to gather insights and perceptions from the market, the two functions align PR, media relations, advertising, and other forms of promotions (i.e., labeling) in addressing their respective informative and persuasive goals of communication. The main challenges of such an integration lie in a typical higher budget assigned to the marketing function, which can cause marketers to collaborate with other key functions to handle potential reputation crises (such as sustainability or CSR) without involving corporate communicators. This can create information imbalances between corporate communication and marketing, which might harm the brand in the long term.
 - Corporate communication and marketers work in synergy in reformulating an advertising campaign when it is driven by sustainability, responsibility, human-based and environmental values.

That is where the marketing message contents integrate their typical emotional and persuasive tone of voice with more informative contents, adapted and endorsed by corporate communicators. Challenges of such integration emerge when marketers put too much emphasis on sustainability-based language. Corporate communicators need to mitigate this attitude to avoid risks of greenwashing and stakeholders' misperceptions.

Table 1 summarizes the description of corporate communication and marketing boundaries in terms of tasks, audience, media usage, and message content as well as the driving forces and the challenges of synergic overlaps between the two functions applied to the three specific situational contexts that we used to gather managers' perspective on the topic.

Tab. 1: Corporate communication and marketing boundaries and overlaps

	Corporate Communication	Marketing	Overlap/Synergy
Revise corporate strategy according to sustainable values	<p><i>Task:</i> keep consistency across all communication levels</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> communities, media, intermediaries, customers, suppliers, employees, governmental institutions, citizens</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> PR and media relations</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> informative tone of voice around sustainable values</p>	<p><i>Task:</i> keep the pulse of market trends and expectations</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> keep relationship with customers and citizens daily</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> digital and traditional media</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> adapted from corporate communication, engaging tone of voice around sustainable values</p>	<p><i>Driving force:</i> sustainability, environmental, human-based values, responsibility</p> <p><i>Challenges:</i> marketing (short-term) results may be compromised in favor of a longer term sustainable driven corporate strategy</p>
Defend brand reputation	<p><i>Task:</i> winning public support via coordinate and consistent communication messages</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> communities, media, intermediaries, customers, suppliers, employees, governmental institutions, citizens</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> PR and media relations</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> informative tone of voice around scientific and verifiable information</p>	<p><i>Task:</i> keep the pulse of market insights and perceptions</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> customers and citizens</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> digital and traditional media, labeling</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> adapted from corporate communication, engaging tone of voice to convince that brand reputation is safe</p>	<p><i>Driving force:</i> potential brand reputation crisis</p> <p><i>Challenges:</i> misalignment of budget (marketing operating with higher budget) and direct interactions between marketing and other functions (sustainability or corporate social responsibility) without informing or involving corporate communicators</p>
Reformulate an advertising strategy	<p><i>Task:</i> endorse and coordinate effective storytelling</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> communities, media, intermediaries, customers, suppliers, employees, governmental institutions, citizens</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> PR and media relations</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> informative tone of voice around</p>	<p><i>Task:</i> write wholly valid storytelling (endorsed by corporate communicators)</p> <p><i>Audience:</i> customers and citizens</p> <p><i>Media usage:</i> digital and traditional media,</p> <p><i>Message content:</i> engaging, emotional and informative tone of voice</p>	<p><i>Driving force:</i> sustainability, environmental, human-based values, responsibility</p> <p><i>Challenges:</i> too much focus around the language of sustainability by marketers should be mitigated by corporate communicators to avoid greenwashing</p>

Source: elaboration of the authors based on the findings

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Our research strengthened some existing theoretical views, outlining critical difficulties in turning theory into corporate communication and marketing practice.

First, our study supported that corporate communication holds vital strategic importance in shaping strategic and tactical managerial decisions (Belasen and Belasen, 2019; Cornelissen, 2004; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Romenti *et al.*, 2022) and strengthening and protecting corporate and brand reputation through a desirable higher synergistic interaction with marketing (Heide *et al.*, 2020; Illia and Balmer, 2012; Van Ruler, 2020).

Second, our findings broadened the discussion on the changing nature of marketing, moving beyond traditional boundaries and adopting a holistic approach (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya and Kkorschun 2008; Fry and Polonsky, 2004; Heath *et al.*, 2017; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Sheth *et al.*, 2007), for which we suggested that corporate communication might provide guidance and facilitate. Furthermore, we provided early evidence on how marketing and corporate communication integration can strengthen firms' roles as social actors (Siano, 2012; Illia and Balmer, 2012; Aksoy *et al.*, 2022).

Indeed, corporate communicators and marketers involved in focus groups and elite interviews agreed that synergistic collaboration between corporate communication and marketing is enforced by the need to develop a multi-stakeholder approach to cope with a multifaceted and complex business environment and the awareness that stakeholders' roles overlap. This strengthens the idea that to evolve from being a pure firm-centric function-oriented to customer satisfaction only to be a multi-stakeholder discipline that creates value for customers by engaging all stakeholders (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015; Hult *et al.*, 2011), marketing needs the validation and the endorsement of corporate communication. That is to shape coordinated messages that prevent misperceptions among stakeholders, as they might see the brand as inauthentic when spreading values that are not immediately associated with traditional marketing goals (Hewlet and Lemon, 2018). In this sense, the convergence of key topics related to sustainability, responsibility, and ethics between marketing and corporate communication follows a circular process that typically begins in the marketing department, when digital marketers explore the sentiment and the potential risks of brand reputation damages and continues in the corporate communication department that sets or refreshes the corporate values that marketing messages will have to incorporate eventually. Ideally, stakeholders' pressures on responsibility and sustainability function as a catalyst for more effective synergic interactions between corporate communication and marketing, both strategically and tactically.

Third, we strengthened the idea that integration between corporate communication and marketing appears fundamental in potential crises affecting the brand reputation (Argenti and Drukenmiller, 2004; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) by clarifying domains in that, typically, to be effective, corporate communication intervenes to protect the corporate image by

restructuring relationships with stakeholders while acting with marketing in protecting the product brand image.

Eventually, our findings contributed to confirm one key difficulty and outline two novel challenges of synergic overlap between the two functions through an empirical-based perspective, which appears to be needed when studying integration between corporate communication and marketing (Aksoy *et al.*, 2022; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Romoli Venturi *et al.*, 2022):

a) a traditional attitude to treat corporate communication and marketing, even theoretically, as ultimate enemies in terms of budget and relevance of topics, as also raised by Illia and Balmer, 2012 and Varey, 2010; b) sometimes marketing urges to convey emotion-based messages that include sustainable topics by bypassing the interactions with corporate communication, increasing, in turn, the risk of brand reputation crises or diminishing the impact that a marketing campaign can have on the overall corporate reputation; c) developing a multi-stakeholder approach through a cross-functional strategy requires a long-term collaboration between the two functions because spot messages and activities in this regard might increase the misperception of marketing in terms of greenwashing.

7.2 Managerial implications

Our study provides several managerial implications.

First, when sustainability and related topics such as responsibility, environmental, and human-based values are embedded in corporate strategy and advertising campaigns, marketers and corporate communicators can benefit from synergic strategic planning. In particular, it is advised that, in the first case, marketers support communicators by gathering insights from the market in terms of citizens' and customers' expectations around sustainability thanks to their social media engagement. In the second case, an effective strategic planning of a sustainability-driven advertising campaign is achieved by integrated storytelling, written by marketers and endorsed by communicators, to avoid the risks of greenwashing misperceptions.

Second, it proposes that marketers and corporate communicators collaborate to identify potential risks of reputational crisis. Once risks are acknowledged, corporate communication and marketing deal with their own responsibilities in engaging the audience and media at corporate and brand levels by creating separate messages with informative and persuasive tone of voice. It is advisable that marketers, given the higher budget at their disposal, avoid acting in silos thinking and interact with business functions that can sustain brand reputation before and during crises (such as sustainability or CSR function) without involving corporate communicators. Excluding the corporate communication function from strategic decisions that entail sustainable matters is, indeed, counterproductive for the sake of brand reputation in the long run.

Eventually, it encourages marketers and corporate communicators to exchange information constantly through meetings aimed at sharing their own strategic plans. This is a practical way to provide each other with guidance and strategic assistance in the corporate strategy (re)definition,

in protecting brand reputation, and in formulating multi-stakeholder advertising campaigns that are aligned with the corporate identity.

7.3 Limitations and further research

While arguing for higher interconnectedness of corporate communication and marketing, we acknowledge that processes are fragmented, and it is challenging to model interactions between the two functions, mainly because our sample is limited and the functions are shaped differently in many MNEs, particularly on the corporate communication side. To improve the common understanding of the alignments and misalignments between corporate communication and marketing, we call for further systematic studies that analyze and organize the factors hindering and facilitating effective collaboration between the two functions. Furthermore, other studies could examine how interaction processes are established and identify best practices among a larger sample of multinational enterprises in different geographies.

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Data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building: the case study of Capital One

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Abstract

Framing of the research: Digitalisation has transformed strategic communication and branding. However, the current literature has not revised traditional brand-building models to reflect the opportunities presented by data and emerging technologies. Furthermore, it remains unclear how data-driven strategic communication can facilitate brand identity building.

Purpose of the paper: This study aims to investigate the role of strategic communication, supported by the data-driven approach, in the process of building brand identity. The advent of the internet and industry 4.0 technologies, and the consequent consumer empowerment, calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional view of brand identity.

Methodology: The study draws on Jaakkola's 'theory synthesis design'. Through the lens of the resource-based view, the data-driven approach in strategic communication and branding studies are integrated to re-examine Urde's corporate brand identity matrix. Despite its recent development, this model still suffers from a control-centric company view. Through theoretical reconceptualisation, a new framework is proposed, supported by an illustrative case study using secondary data.

Findings: The theoretical framework shows that big data, as strategic resources, improve organised listening and reflective communication, impacting the building of brand identity. Data-driven strategic communication influences mission and vision (innovation orientation), culture (data-driven decision-making), competencies (data science skills), value propositions (personalised products and experiences), relationships (data-driven corporate communication) and positioning (strategic stakeholder listening). The Capital One case study, as best practice, illustrates the application of the novel theoretical framework.

Research limits: The study presents the limitations of a conceptual paper built from a literature review and on a single illustrative case study that uses secondary data.

Practical implications: The proposed theoretical framework could orientate top management decisions and strengthen the strategic role of communication and brand managers in brand identity building in the digital age. Thanks to strategic communication according to a data-driven logic, managers could develop new value propositions for innovative business models, improve competitive positioning and build personalised relationships. Moreover, the inclusion of data in corporate culture, as well as the synergistic co-existence of various managerial skills, facilitates performance excellence.

Originality of the paper: *This study proposes a rethinking of brand identity building, emphasising the data-driven approach in strategic communication.*

Key words: *strategic communication; brand identity; data-driven approach; big data; illustrative case study*

1. Introduction

Industry 4.0 involves profound innovations, significantly affecting corporate communication (Ihator, 2001). In digital transformation, in which data flows are growing exponentially, communication increasingly becomes a strategic driver of business success. The use of data to inform decision-making has only recently entered the realm of strategic communication (Weiner and Kochhar, 2016; Wiesenber *et al.*, 2017).

Using data results in strategic communication changes, influencing brand management (Kallinikos and Constantiou, 2015; Mikalef *et al.*, 2016). In the new era of branding, which is increasingly focused on co-creation in digital environments, data-driven organised listening provides crucial insights into stakeholders' brand perceptions and behaviours (Invernizzi, 2004; Cornelissen, 2008; Siano *et al.*, 2015). The indications deriving from organised listening can be transferred, through reflective communication, to top management to guarantee adequate information support for corporate decisions (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). Reflective communication involves reflecting data and information derived from organised listening within the executive committee to guide corporate vision and culture and enable the adoption of corporate or business strategies aligned with stakeholders' expectations (Steyn, 2003). Data-driven organised listening and reflective communication contribute to orientating brand-building strategies and influencing brand identity development (Michel, 2017).

Despite the increasing attention paid to branding in the digital age, very few studies have explored how strategic communication through a data-driven approach can contribute to change processes involving brands (McGuire *et al.*, 2012; Aimé *et al.*, 2022; Conte *et al.*, 2022).

The existing body of knowledge on brand identity building is not current because of substantial changes affecting brands in digital environments, such as the active involvement of multiple stakeholders in branding practices, as well as the proliferation of data and industry 4.0 technologies (Veloutsou, 2023). Consequently, there is a gap in the literature concerning how the brand-building process can be influenced by datafication (McAfee *et al.*, 2012; Wiesenber *et al.*, 2017).

Specifically, recent studies on brand identity have emphasised the need for scholars to embrace a participatory, multistakeholder approach to developing a brand identity. According to these studies, brand identity needs to be interpreted as a dynamic, social and polysemous construct, encompassing the expectations and perspectives of various actors who act as active co-creators in the development of brand identity (Kornum *et al.*, 2017; Wider *et al.*, 2018; Padela *et al.*, 2023).

Despite this call, the brand management literature remains rooted in traditional models of brand identity building and fails to provide further advancements. For instance, the most recent corporate brand identity matrix (CBIM) by Urde (2013), although it combines an internal and external perspective on brand identity building, does not emphasise the importance of co-creation and new technologies in shaping brand identity in the digital context. Therefore, it is necessary to intensify academic efforts to update the brand-building process to incorporate recent advances and re-evaluate traditional models for brand identity building (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Urde, 2013) considering the opportunities that data and digital offer (Olsen, 2018). It can help companies adapt and evolve their branding practices to keep up with environmental changes (Veloutsou, 2023).

In light of these considerations, this conceptual study aims to investigate the role of strategic communication, empowered by the data-driven approach, in building brand identity.

For this purpose, the study uses Jaakkola's (2020) 'theory synthesis design.' Through the lens of the resource-based view (RBV; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991), the data-driven approaches in strategic communication and branding studies are integrated to reinterpret Urde's CBIM. In line with the RBV theory, several studies have indicated that big data expresses potential in terms of their function as a valuable resource for brand management (Tien, 2013; Wamba *et al.*, 2015), especially for brand building (Conte *et al.*, 2022).

This study proposes a novel theoretical framework for rethinking brand identity building, emphasising the data-driven approach in strategic communication. It provides an integration perspective to enhance the data-driven logic in branding practices (Aimé *et al.*, 2022). The framework is supported by an illustrative case study that uses secondary data (Brodie and Benson-Rea, 2016). Using Capital One, a financial holding company, the study explores the role of the data-driven approach in the internal (mission and vision, culture, competencies) and external (value propositions, relationships, positioning) components of brand identity, as proposed by Urde's CBIM.

The study highlights the strategic value of data (Grover *et al.*, 2018) for building brand identity in digital environments (Kristal *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, the study supports processes aimed at rejuvenating brands in light of online consumer empowerment and offers new insights into strategic communication (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2017).

From a managerial point of view, the proposed theoretical framework helps top management and communication managers shape brand identity in the digital age. Using strategic communication based on data-driven logic, they can develop innovative business models, enhance competitive positioning and build personalised relationships. This approach fosters a data-driven corporate culture and leverages diverse managerial skills for performance excellence.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Data-driven approach in strategic communication

Corporate communication is changing profoundly in the technologies adopted and the strategies implemented (Ithator, 2001). Industry 4.0 tools generate an enormous amount of data, significantly influencing the strategic dynamics of corporate communication (Mandelli, 2017). Controlling and interpreting data means undertaking digital analytics (Power, 2014; Wheeler, 2016), namely, activities that allow data collection to develop forecasts for firm value creation (Phillips, 2014). Specifically, in the current competitive environment, big data are emerging as an essential prerequisite for companies' decisions (Gartner, 2019).

In line with the RBV of firms, several studies have pointed out that big data are considered valuable resources (Wamba *et al.*, 2015; Grover *et al.*, 2018; Dahiya *et al.*, 2022). The RBV is one of the most widely accepted theoretical perspectives in strategic management (Priem and Butler, 2001; Rouse and Daellenbach, 2002) and emphasises the importance of a firm's resources in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage.

From an RBV perspective, big data are strategic resources (Zhang *et al.*, 2020): they are valuable (data allows for the development of new business opportunities); rare (the integration of data is difficult to find by competitors); inimitable (competitors cannot imitate or purchase the information obtained from data); embedded in an organisation; and nonsubstitutable (data are integrated into business processes and cannot be replaced by alternative resources).

The adoption of data as a strategic resource configures a data-driven approach that strengthens strategic communication (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2017). The development of data-driven logic, in fact, is revolutionising organised listening, facilitating the acquisition of information from stakeholders (Invernizzi, 2004; Cornelissen, 2008; Siano *et al.*, 2015). Through strategic-reflective activities, these inputs become fundamental to support top management decisions (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005).

Thus, data promote the creation of value inside and outside companies, developing more effective relations with stakeholders. Indeed, data analysis improves the strategic dynamics of corporate communication, strengthening relationships and bonds of trust between organisations and their public (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2013; Siano *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, using data analytics enables constant monitoring of communication performance (Wiencierz and Röttger, 2017). This allows organisations to understand whether and how they are pursuing their communication objectives, compare their performance over time and define possible improvement actions (Erevelles *et al.*, 2016).

Big data research has received increasing attention in recent years, and several studies have begun to analyse the strategic value of the data-driven approach (McGuire *et al.*, 2012; Aimé *et al.*, 2022). However, big data are still rarely explored in the strategic communication field and branding studies (Pantano *et al.*, 2019; Giglio *et al.*, 2020). The data-driven approach in strategic communication supports stakeholder listening that helps

companies to monitor brand health, and periodically examine customer mindset constantly measures to guide corporate decisions (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2003). Many aspects of branding processes can be predicted from data, including how consumers perceive brands' personalities (Dew *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it becomes necessary to investigate the role of data in brand-building processes and, specifically, brand identity building.

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2.2 Brand identity building

In accordance with the principles of the RBV, brand represents a highly valuable and firm-specific resource (Barney, 1991).

The process of brand building begins with the creation of a unique and strong brand identity. Brand identity has traditionally been defined in the literature as 'symbols and the set of brand associations that represent the core character of the brand that the team supporting the brand aspire to create or maintain as identifiers of the brand to other people' (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018, p. 257).

Brand identity has always aroused great interest among scholars, and various models have been proposed in the literature on brand management (Aaker, 1996; Urde, 2013). Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model represents the 'North Star' for the development of other models (e.g. Collins and Porras, 1997; de Chernatony, 2010) and a break with earlier models mainly concerned with the development and control of a specific brand image (e.g. Park *et al.*, 1986).

These brand identity models share the idea that the processes of brand identity building are under the direct and exclusive control of companies (Michel, 2017). The elements of brand identity are determined internally by the organisation and then communicated externally to create a desired brand image and reputation and a consistent brand meaning among stakeholders (Chung and Byrom, 2021).

This inside-out and control perspective has been influential in the study of brand identity building but currently cannot cope with the rapid changes in the actual context (Veloutsou, 2023). The internet and the gradual loss of managerial control over brands are challenging the traditional perspective of brand identity as a stable entity that brand managers can develop and control (Siano *et al.*, 2022; Padela *et al.*, 2023).

Recent research, such as stakeholder-orientated brand management studies and the performative and multistakeholder approach to brand identity building, have identified a radical shift in the way brand identity is conceived (da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Michel, 2017).

Stakeholders become active co-creators in brand identity building through their shared expectations, experiences and identities (Kornum *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, brand identity is revealed as a dynamic, unstable, social and polysemous construct subject to ongoing influence by the multiple interactions between organisations and stakeholders (Wider *et al.*, 2018; Padela *et al.*, 2023). According to this viewpoint, there is no final stage to brand identity; rather, it should be re-envisioned as 'a nested system of identities' (Kornum *et al.*, 2017, p. 432).

With the advent of the digital environment, the existing models of brand identity and the logic associated with brand building need to be re-

evaluated (Veloutsou, 2023). Specifically, industry 4.0 technologies (e.g. big data) that provide a deeper understanding of stakeholders may represent an opportunity for the development of a more relevant brand identity in line with audience expectations (Aimé *et al.*, 2022; Yan *et al.*, 2022).

However, the brand management literature remains locked into traditional models of brand identity building and does not provide advances in this direction. The most recent CBIM of Urde (2013), for instance, although it seems to combine an inside-in with an outside-in perspective of brand identity building, fails to emphasise the importance of co-creation and new technologies in shaping a brand identity in a digital context.

Urde's CBIM

Urde's CBIM considers external elements (value propositions, relationships, positioning), internal elements (mission and vision, culture, competencies) and the core (especially brand promise and value) for brand identity building.

Specifically, Urde defined the components as follows:

- *value proposition*: appealing argument directed at stakeholders
- *relationships*: the way an organisation with a brand works with stakeholders and relates to their needs
- *positioning*: a brand's position in the market and in the hearts and minds of stakeholders
- *mission and vision*: the reason the organisation exists and where it is heading
- *culture*: reflection of corporate attitudes, values and beliefs, and of the ways in which an organisation works and behaves
- *competencies*: the capabilities, processes and core competencies of an organisation.

From Urde's perspective, all components are considered in an integrated manner. The construction of each element relates to the others and to the core, placed at the centre of the brand identity structure.

The model, however, does not consider how new digital contexts influence the development of each component.

3. Method

The present study draws on Jaakkola's (2020) 'theory synthesis design'. Through the synthesis and integration of two streams of the literature pertaining to the data-driven approach in strategic communication and branding, the theoretical foundations of brand identity are explored and extended by adopting a single perspective (MacInnis, 2011), which is the RBV theory (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Through this theoretical lens, it is possible to conceive not only the brand but also big data as strategic resources that can create value for firms and sustain competitive advantage (Mata *et al.*, 1995; Grover *et al.*, 2018).

The theory synthesis proposed in this study allows for a revision of Urde's (2013) CBIM. Several reasons led to the selection of the CBIM

as a starting point for this study: (1) this brand identity model is one of the most recent models developed following the advent of the digital age, (2) an inside-out and outside-in approach is provided for brand identity building and (3) it provides a clear distinction between the internal and external components of brand identity.

Therefore, the present study proposes a novel theoretical framework that considers the role of strategic communication empowered by data-driven logic in defining the external (value proposition, relationships, position) and internal (mission and vision, culture, competencies) components of brand identity, reflecting on the core, a central element in Urde's CBIM (2013).

Capital One's case study supports the theoretical framework by illustrating how data-driven strategic communication can contribute to brand identity building. In this research study, the use of an illustrative case study is primarily intended to integrate theory and practice by identifying at least one relevant practical case as an example of theoretical arguments (Levy, 2008).

Illustrative case studies are commonly employed in management (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014) and in branding research (Brodie and Benson-Rea, 2016). These are appropriate for generating theoretical insights when relatively little is known about a phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). By observing best practices, this methodology can help construct new theories concerning ongoing technological change, but it can also illustrate empirical examples of theories (Scapens, 2004).

In the present study, Capital One is selected as a best practice for generating business value from data. Capital One is a diversified financial services company, classified by Fortune among the top 10 of the United States' most innovative companies in 2023. This ranking recognises companies that transform industries from the inside out through innovative processes, such as research and development teams inventing new products, efficient processes that strengthen a company's bottom line, and inspiring leaders who promote brainstorming and collaboration that leads to original creations.

This illustrative case study uses the collection of secondary data, which is assumed to provide insights as valuable as those derived from interviews and direct observation (Merriam, 1988; Schiavone *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, online documents and resources are useful to researchers for discovering meaning and uncovering new insights. To increase the validity of the data collection, information is gathered from multiple sources (Yin, 2017). The secondary data, which is mostly textual, comes from Capital One's official documents and corporate website, and interviews in online magazines and newspapers. All these documents are freely available online.

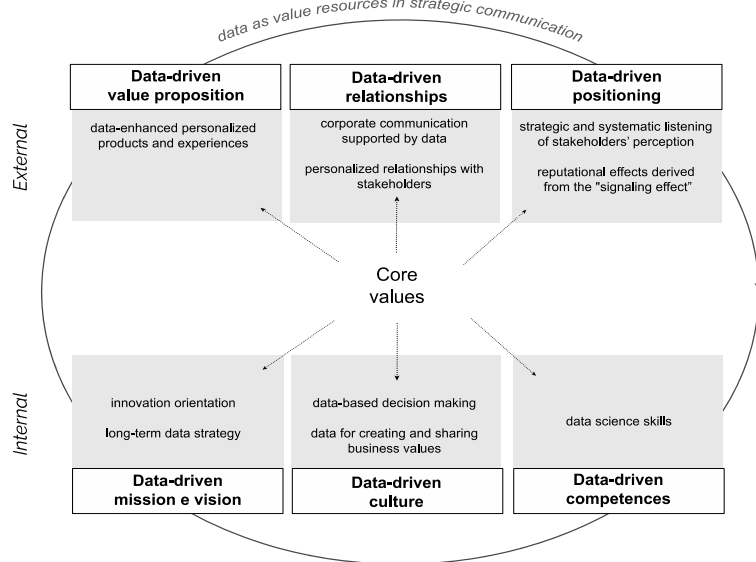
The secondary data collected are analysed by considering the internal and external components of brand identity building of Urde's CBIM. Through this analysis, the case study illustrates the application of the theoretical framework in an empirical context.

4. Theoretical framework: data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building

The reinterpretation of Urde’s matrix, in light of studies on the data-driven approach, brings out the impact role of big data, as a strategic resource according to the RBV, on the brand identity building.

Data-driven logic implies a strengthening of strategic communication as it facilitates the organised listening to stakeholders’ expectations. Data and information derived from strategic listening orientate corporate and business strategy decisions (reflective listening communication). Consequently, data-driven strategic communication enables a rethink of the definition of the external and internal components of brand identity, in accordance with Urde’s CBIM. In line with these considerations, a novel theoretical framework is proposed (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Framework of data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building



Source: our elaboration

Strategic communication, supported by data listening, affects the internal components (mission and vision, culture, competencies) of brand identity.

Big data are resources that can be integrated into long-term corporate strategies (Grover *et al.*, 2018), thus affecting mission and vision statements. Harnessing the power of big data to listen to and understand the evolving target market allows for the orientating of a company’s strategy and vision (Jobs *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, by explaining the adoption of a data-driven approach to business strategies, organisations demonstrate their orientation to innovation, as well as a commitment to enhancing a customer-centric perspective through customised solutions.

The strategic integration of data into business dynamics allows the configuration of a data-driven corporate culture (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). According to Kiron and Shockley (2011), a data-driven culture is based on the following assumptions: data are seen as intangible resources that have value for the organisation, members of top management emphasise and support data analysis when making decisions, and the organisation uses the data-driven approach to facilitate the creation and sharing of corporate value among stakeholders.

To develop a data-driven culture, an organisation's knowledge and skills must be expanded to analyse strategic information from organised listening (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). New competencies in the data-driven approach (i.e. in the collection, management and interpretation of big data) constitute rare, firm-specific and unique resources that are useful in sustaining competitive advantage (Grover *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the use of data is changing the job profiles sought in organisations, leading to an expansion of skills that include data science (Loebbecke and Picot, 2015).

The data-driven approach also affects the external components of CBMI.

Adopting the RBV lens, data listening insights represent a strategic resource that can create business value by improving organisational processes, customer experiences and firm performances (Grover *et al.*, 2018). Big data can support the business model innovation process, creating data-driven business models (Sorescu, 2017; Urbinati *et al.*, 2019) and providing guidance for the development of new value propositions (Teng and Lu, 2016), which is considered one of their key elements (Woerner and Wixom, 2015). Indeed, digital analytics allows for collecting customer feedback that, in addition to enabling profiling strategies, provides useful inputs for companies to promptly adjust product and service offerings according to current demand (Feng and Guo, 2018). With the support of data, new value propositions that are more in line with consumer needs can be created and communicated (Teng and Lu, 2016).

Thus, data may contribute to the creation of value inside and outside of an organisation, allowing for the development of more effective brand-stakeholder relationships. Specifically, analysing, interpreting and applying data more effectively can result in an improvement in corporate communication (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2013; Siano *et al.*, 2015), leading to the emergence of new approaches: data-driven supply chain communication (Yu *et al.*, 2018), data-driven human resource and talent management in internal communication and recruitment (Sparrow *et al.*, 2015), and data-driven marketing related to customer-communication flows. Data-driven marketing communication is the most mature and offers the most significant potential for growth in terms of personalising customer relationships (Wedel and Kannan, 2016).

Big data, as rare resources from the RBV perspective, also act on the positioning sought by organisations in two ways. First, data support the process of listening to stakeholders' opinions, thus improving brands' competitive positioning (Tirunillai and Tellis, 2014). Through systematic stakeholder listening, brands can gain a deeper understanding of how

stakeholders perceive the brand's values. Consequently, big data and strategic listening, including social listening, can help redefine or strengthen a brand's positioning by monitoring the external environment. In this way, the brand can be positioned dynamically and accurately (Feng and Guo, 2018). Second, adopting a data-driven approach and being recognised by corporate awards send a symbolic signal to stakeholders that communicates brand innovativeness, achieving reputational benefit from the 'signalling effect' (Grover *et al.*, 2018).

5. Illustrative case study of Capital One

5.1 Overview

To develop a potential empirical understanding of the proposed framework on data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building, the study uses Capital One, a financial holding company, as an illustrative case study.

Capital One is one of the largest retail banks in the United States, with \$343.7 billion in deposits and \$467.8 billion in total assets as of 30 June 2023. Headquartered in McLean, Virginia, Capital One offers a broad spectrum of financial products and services to consumers, small businesses and commercial clients through a variety of channels. Capital One has branches located primarily in New York, Louisiana, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey and the District of Columbia. A Fortune 500 company, Capital One trades on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol 'COF' and is included in the S&P 100 index.

Capital One's approach includes being grounded in data, which are a valuable resource embedded in the corporate culture; indeed, the organisation has revolutionised the credit card industry with data and technology. *'Our rallying cry back in 1987 was to build an information-based technology company that does banking, competing against banks that use information and technology, but it may not be who they are'* (Annual Report Capital One, 2022).

The case study highlights the strategic role of communication supported by data in brand identity building. Rich Fairbank, Capital One's CEO, has worked for many years on brand building supported by stakeholder listening and data analytics. For example, through data analysis, the Capital One Insights Center allows insights that support the creation and sharing of brand values, such as inclusion, equity, integrity, teamwork, openness and value diversity. Fairbank stated that *'at Capital One, we believe the power of technology can give customers greater protection, confidence and control of their finances. Among the most impactful ways for us to achieve these goals are the responsible, human-centered use of real-time data and machine learning'*.

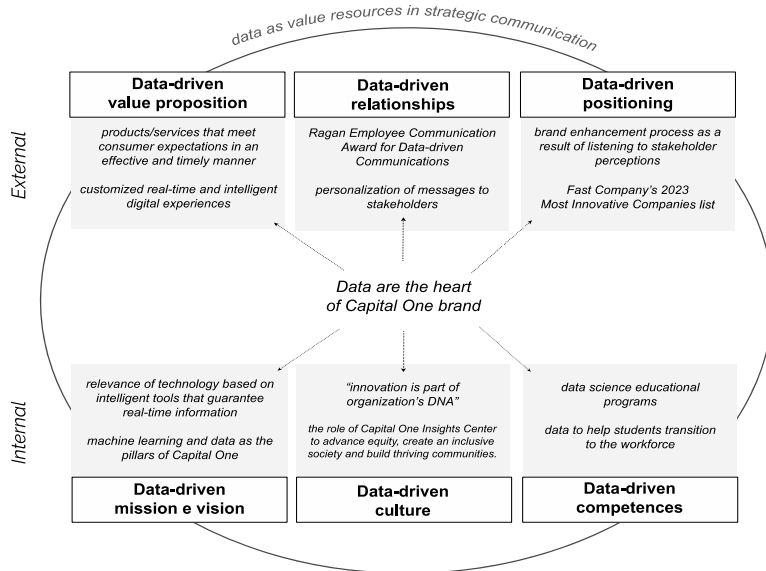
5.2 Data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building of Capital One

In accordance with the proposed theoretical framework, the case study illustrates how Capital One adopts a data-driven approach to listen to

stakeholders' needs and reflect these inputs in business decisions for the definition of the internal (mission and vision, culture, competencies) and external (value proposition, relationships, positioning) components of brand identity (see Figure 2).

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Fig. 2: Data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building of Capital One



Source: our elaboration

Mission and vision

Capital One's mission and vision display a bank holding company that has grown and gained a deep understanding of the technology-driven business dynamics in its industry. The mission of Capital One is to *'change banking for good'*. This statement conveys the company's commitment to redefining how the financial industry works through customer-centric and innovative solutions. Capital One strives to enable a better banking experience by using technology, ensuring accessibility to financial services and delivering personalised customer service.

The mission underlines the pivotal role of technology that uses intelligent tools that guarantee real-time information: *'Thirty-five years ago, we were founded on the belief that the banking industry would be revolutionised by information and technology, beginning with credit cards. We believe that innovation is powered by perspective. Across the company, we're building customer experiences that are real-time and intelligent'*.

Since Capital One was founded, data have been at the heart of its business and communication dynamics. The company believes in the power of data to drive insights from stakeholder listening and to empower people to deliver real-time solutions to millions of customers, making banking simple and accessible.

Capital One's vision statement is *'we dare to dream, disrupt and deliver a better way'*. By daring to dream, Capital One illustrates how it embraces innovations and transformations. The company's goal is to build a leading American information technology company. To achieve this, the company relies on machine learning and data, which are two important pillars of the company's long-term strategy. The decisions that Capital One makes using machine learning have a large impact on customers and the community.

Culture

Innovation is part of Capital One's DNA. The company has undergone a decade-long technology transformation that has laid the foundation for innovations that benefit its customers. The company uses real-time data at scale, artificial intelligence and machine learning to build products, services and experiences.

A true digital transformation requires changing the culture of an organisation to uphold the adoption of new organisational structures or operational processes. During its 10-year data journey, Capital One found a change in the way viewed and used data across the organisation was a necessity. A significant cultural shift was in treating data as resources to orientate corporate culture.

Capital One's values include collaboration, innovation, excellence, integrity, inclusion and respect. The organisation aims to help customers succeed by bringing humanity and simplicity into their everyday banking experiences. Andy Navarrete, the executive vice president, head of external affairs at Capital One, said: *'Capital One is a mission-led company that was founded on the belief that no one should be locked out of the financial system'*. For the company, data are powerful tools for social change and are critically important for understanding complex problems, creating tailored solutions and fostering a world in which more people can achieve financial wellbeing. For this reason, the Capital One Insights Center was developed to produce, through data collection, insights that advance equity and create an inclusive society. The centre draws on deep analytical expertise to serve as a platform for data and dialogue, convening thought leaders and change makers to address gaps in opportunity.

Diversity and inclusion are values also shared in the Capital One workplace. The company is deeply committed to growing the diversity of its talent and building a culture of belonging in which everyone can thrive. Capital One strives to use its expertise and resources to build stronger, more inclusive teams.

The company also uses data to build better communities by investing in efforts to promote socioeconomic mobility and combat racial discrimination. The Capital One Insights Center builds on impact initiative to support growth in underserved communities. Shena Ashley, the company president, said: *'leveraging Capital One's analytical expertise, we aim to equip changemakers with real-time data, insights and solutions-oriented research essential for creating a more inclusive, thriving society'*.

Competencies

Among the skilled professionals sought by Capital One, in addition to brand managers and brand ambassadors, data analysts and data scientists

play an important role in supporting company decisions. For this reason, the company developed a Tech College, which is an internally created learning platform that helps all associates acquire new technological knowledge. The platform offers courses that provide technical skill development through machine learning and artificial intelligence.

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Moreover, Capital One aims to create equitable data science education in Virginia. Recognising the lack of data science curricula in Virginia, Capital One provided a \$100,000 seed funding grant to CodeVA to develop a new curriculum aimed at helping high school students gain foundational understanding about this topic. This new curriculum is rooted in the practical application and execution of data science concepts to prepare students for college and entry into the workforce. Kurt Engleman, CFO of risk at Capital One and a member of the CodeVA board of directors, said: *'CodeVA is a strong advocate for ensuring equitable computer science education throughout the state of Virginia. Capital One has supported CodeVA's efforts and has been preparing students for careers in the technology industry since its inception 10 years ago. We are excited to see the impact this curriculum will have in training the next generation of data scientists'*.

Capital One also uses data to help students transition into the workforce. Specifically, Capital One supports Harvard's Project on Workforce to create a tool that examines local worker trends and graduate growth. Harvard's Project on Workforce seeks to provide better and more consistent information to jobseekers, employers, educational institutions, governments and policymakers for identifying career pathways that do not just lead to a good first job.

Value proposition

Capital One's value proposition focuses on offering a diverse range of financial products and services suitable for various customer segments. For more than 100 million customers, the company offers credit cards, checking and savings accounts, loans and investment products. In addition, the brand provides its clients with software solutions, application programming interfaces and open-source projects that can enhance their businesses. From cloud and data management to machine learning and analytics, Capital One builds and makes available to everyone an array of in-house technology platforms, tools and solutions.

Capital One places technology and data at the centre of its value proposition and business strategy and can be viewed as the expression of a data-driven business model. With the help of real-time data, artificial intelligence and machine learning, the brand builds products, services and experiences that can positively affect millions of lives.

Through extensive technological expertise and by using insights derived from data-driven strategic listening, the brand offers its customers 'products that are easy to build and easy to enjoy' and customised real-time and intelligent digital experiences. Competitive rates and flexible terms and conditions are provided, along with robust security and support measures tailored to the needs of individual customers.

Moreover, Capital One uses data to create business value not only in terms of product and service innovation and improved customer

experiences but also for symbolic value creation related to innovation and for enhanced brand performance. As stated in the brand's 'Annual Report 2022', the company's long-term economic and financial success depends, in large part, on its ability to assess customers' needs by using digital technology to provide products and services that meet their expectations in an effective and timely manner.

Relationships

A significant part of Capital One's success can be attributed to its extensive and strong stakeholder relationships, which it maintains and nurtures through data-driven communication.

Capital One invests in data-driven communication at various levels of the organisation by promoting an ongoing dialogue and feedback loop system. The brand uses this system to understand its stakeholders' needs and to incorporate their ideas into strategic decision-making processes in accordance with the data collected from internal and external stakeholder relationships.

Communication with employees of companies is primarily driven by data. The brand was awarded the 'Ragan Employee Communication Award for Data-driven Communications' for its financial services onboarding email campaign in 2023. The award recognises the most notable internal communications campaigns and initiatives. Through monthly monitoring of the email campaign, the Capital One team was able to define progressive improvements to content, timing and other key features. Capital One's campaign used technology to test and deliver key messages to new employees. In August 2022, the campaign's eight emails received an average open rate of 87%, beating the industry average of 70%. In addition, Capital One integrated chatbots into community forums to listen and to answer employee questions about internal tools and processes. Cosette Goldstein and Alison Chi, senior software engineer, said: *'Our bot responds to FAQs in over 150 internal Capital One Slack channels. This gives those asking questions immediate answers and lets the community members who are most likely to respond with the ability to focus on other aspects of their jobs'*.

Insights generated by data and analytics are used by the brand to build and nurture strong client relationships by providing a better understanding of its client base and responding promptly to its needs and goals.

Capital One declared in its 'Annual Report 2022' that *'it invested in new products, signed new partners and enhanced our digital experiences to deepen customer relationships and to help them succeed'*. Through data-driven marketing and consequent advancement in messaging personalisation, Capital One is *'quickly approaching an ability to target customers based on individual needs and preferences and also speak to them in a way that connects and feels personalised which will continue to be a differentiator for companies who are continuously looking for ways to break through in such a competitive marketplace'*, according to Bill TenBusch, director of digital marketing and cross channel analytics at Capital One at Forbes.

Finally, Capital One offers data solutions to address the main problems of its target communities, demonstrating effective community relationship management. For instance, the brand partnered with Feed More, a

Richmond-based food bank that collects, prepares and distributes food to the needy throughout central Virginia. By exploring a large data set (e.g. postcode), the brand identified the areas that suffered the most from food insecurity during the pandemic COVID-19.

In addition, the Capital One Foundation is collaborating with the Black Economic Alliance Foundation to create a predictive modelling tool to *'help leaders make data-rich choices about how and where to deploy their resources for maximum effect on combating the racial wealth gap'*, according to Samantha Tweedy, CEO of the Black Economic Alliance.

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Positioning

The brand is recognised in the market as highly innovative. It was named in Fast Company's 2023 Most Innovative Companies list for two consecutive years in both the business services and travel and hospitality categories for its innovations in these areas. Moreover, the company was classified by Fortune among the top 10 of America's most innovative companies in 2023.

Capital One has worked extensively to develop a strong brand identity over the years, thanks to the insight of its CEO, Rich Fairbank. In 2011, a brand equity study on how consumers viewed the Capital One brand revealed that consumers overwhelmingly associated one attribute with the brand: "They send me lots of mail" (Horst and Duboff, 2015).

In response to this brand equity research, Capital One redesigned many aspects of its brand, resulting in a higher level of visibility in its target market. To improve its reputational capital, it invested more in brand-building campaigns to emphasise corporate branding in its communication. Thus, Capital One illustrates how it uses data and systematic listening tools to assess how its key stakeholders view its brand to stay relevant and competitive.

6. Discussion and implications

Through the development of a novel theoretical framework, illustrated through the case study of Capital One, the study provides an integration perspective aimed at enhancing data-driven strategic communication in brand management.

The study proposes a first review of brand identity building in the context of digital transformation. A rereading of Urde's matrix, in light of studies on the data-driven approach in strategic communication, highlights the role of big data on brand identity building.

Therefore, this study provides several theoretical contributions. First, it seeks to integrate data-driven and brand-building perspectives through the lens of the RBV, which helps to explain the importance of data use in the context of a brand of a data-driven organisation. In line with emerging research adopting the RBV in big data analytics, this study highlights the strategic value of data (Grover *et al.*, 2018). Based on the RBV perspective, the proposed theoretical framework recognises that big data are valuable, rare, inimitable, embedded in organisations and non-substitutable strategic

resources, which facilitate performance excellence (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). The study supports others that have emphasised how knowledge generated from big data can emerge as a key differentiator among competing firms (Dahiya *et al.*, 2022).

Second, it enriches the limited studies that have delved into the role of data in strategic communication decisions and activities (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2017). The study highlights how data-driven logic has a positive impact on organised listening and reflective communication activities. It supports the idea that data represent resources of strategic value that are able to improve strategic communication. Indeed, data provide adequate information support to orientate corporate visions and cultures and to enable the adoption of business strategies in line with stakeholder expectations (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005).

Third, the work contributes to providing new insights into the use of data in strategic communication for brand identity building in the digital environment (da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). The literature remains very silent regarding the impact of the data-driven approach on building brand identity. Specifically, the framework points out the role of data-driven strategic communication in rethinking the definition of the external and internal components of brand identity, in accordance with Urde's CBIM. It aims to actualise the traditional models of brand identity building considering the opportunities that data and digital offer (Olsen, 2018). Thus, in line with studies that have reconceptualised brand identity as a new dynamic and participatory construct, this study considers the new perspectives of brand co-creation (Michel, 2017). Such processes are pivotal for the construction of an organic brand, which integrates input (ideas, suggestions, needs) from stakeholders into brand building (Aimé *et al.*, 2022).

In terms of managerial implications, the study could offer a valuable tool to orientate top management decisions and strengthen the strategic role of communication or brand managers in brand identity building in the digital context. Capital One's best practices highlight how data-driven strategic communication could contribute to brand identity building, enabling superior corporate performance. The proposed framework and the best practices of Capital One could increase awareness among brand and communication managers of organisations at national and international levels of the power of big data as strategic resources. Specifically, the insights offered could be particularly useful for communication managers of Italian organisations who, although aware of the value of a data-driven approach, do not yet systematically use big data for strategic communication activities (Conte *et al.*, 2022).

Thanks to strategic listening based on a data-driven approach, managers could develop new value propositions to encourage innovative business models and strengthen brands' competitive positioning (Sorescu, 2017).

By integrating big data into the organisational context, brand managers could lay the foundations of a data-driven culture that may help top management make forward-looking decisions that improve companies' competitiveness (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). The data-driven culture may allow

the brand to provide its stakeholders with personalised services and experiences, achieving higher levels of loyalty and developing effective long-term relationships (Iglesias and Saleem, 2015). Given that scholars have stressed the importance of 'brand as a relationship' (Aaker, 1997), the data-driven approach and the personalisation that it enables has, in fact, a positive impact on the construction of brand-stakeholders relationships and, consequently, the effectiveness of corporate communication.

Specifically, by analysing all user interactions with the brand, a company could draw data in real time on customer behaviour for establishing personalised multichannel campaigns (Cheung *et al.*, 2003). In fact, many scholars have argued that big data support the microtargeting of customers and the co-creation of products and information, positively contributing to customer communication (Banasiewicz, 2013; Erevelles *et al.*, 2016).

The introduction of the data-driven strategic communication approach in brand identity building requires new skills in the data science domain (Wedel and Kannan, 2016). To facilitate the integration of data into brand processes, data sharing within an organisation and the formation of collaborative teams becomes necessary (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Horst and Duboff, 2015). Thus, top management and brand and communication managers need to be supported by data scientists and data analysts in brand identity building to rejuvenate brand management processes by integrating industry 4.0 tools (Yen and Valia, 2013; Taylor, 2017).

Finally, the inclusion of data in sets of strategic corporate resources and the synergistic co-existence of various managerial skills could allow companies to achieve potential advantages and, thus, superior performance (Chadwick *et al.*, 2015).

7. Limitations and future research

This study has the limitations of a conceptual paper, which is built on a literature review and a single illustrative case study based on secondary data. Although the single case delves into some aspects, it is not exhaustive to fully explore the research topic of the present study (Schiavone *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the secondary data are informative for the purpose of this study, but the analysis of them is subject to the limitations of a deductive approach (Bowen, 2009).

Despite these limitations, the proposed work is an attempt to stimulate academic and managerial interests in data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building by providing insights that can be used as a starting point for further research.

There are several possible directions for future research. First, future studies could explore the proposed theoretical framework in other empirical contexts. Research developments may focus on expanding the organisations involved as case studies and expanding the types of business activities examined. For example, recent studies have highlighted the impact of big data in the healthcare sector (Aceto *et al.*, 2020). Second, future research could integrate a qualitative-quantitative methodological approach by means of web surveys and in-depth interviews with top

management and brand or communication managers to gain a better understanding of the role of data in strategic communication.

Finally, using the inputs proposed in Urde's matrix reinterpretation, future research could focus on innovative brand identity models that are able to valorise the industry 4.0 toolkit. In developing such models, however, brand managers need to address crucial issues. Building brand identity models supported by data and industry 4.0 technologies requires considering the risks associated with data quality and interpretability and the tools and procedures available to mitigate these risks.

Future research may lead to the rejuvenation of brand-building strategies and the promotion of better synergy between competencies in a company, as well as the raising of awareness regarding the importance of big data in organisations' top management.

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The role of strategic communication in facing paracrisis: a multiple case approach in the lab-grown meat industry

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *The article focuses on the growing cultured meat industry and the strategic communication used in crisis contexts with a high media impact.*

Purpose of the paper: *This article explores the strategic role that communication can play in preventing crises and minimising their negative effects in the cultured meat industry.*

Methodology: *Using an exploratory methodology, the article analyses the communication strategies adopted by four leading companies in the cultured meat industry over one year on the social media Facebook through a content analysis with NVivo 14 software.*

Findings: *The results of the study show that the strategies most used by the four companies analysed, namely, 'reform', 'supportive PR', and 'revision' strategies, were able to create good engagement with the public and stimulate optimism in public comments. These strategies emphasised the companies' commitment to leading the challenges of this sector, educating the public, conveying transparent information, and creating synergies to broaden the audience.*

Research limitations: *The limitations of this research, which future studies can overcome, are the small sample size, the subjectivity typical of content analysis, and the possibility of exploring multiple social media platforms to understand differences among consumer generations.*

Practical implications: *The study provides many implications for managers and professionals in monitoring online debate and discussion to contain the negative narratives spread by detractors and develop communication strategies to highlight the positive contributions made by the company's activities.*

Originality of the paper: *This study's originality lies in its appreciation of strategic communication's central and multifaceted role in the innovative cultivated meat industry. Its essential role in the pre-crisis phase to monitor the external environment and identify influential stakeholders, that is, the public, is emphasised.*

Key words: *strategic communication; communication strategy; corporate communication paracrisis; social media; Facebook; cultured meat industry.*

1. Introduction

This study examines the ongoing debate surrounding the emerging cultured meat industry, which involves the production of lab-grown

or cell-based meat from animal cells in a laboratory setting (Goodwin and Shoulders, 2013; Hopkins and Dacey, 2008). The global turnover of companies that produce cultured meat has seen notable growth in recent years. In 2022, the cultured meat market was valued at approximately \$246.9 million (GVR, 2023). In 2023, the value increased to \$665 million, indicating the rapid development of the industry (GMI, 2023). According to the Cultured Meat Market - A Global and Regional Analysis, 2024-2033, the cultured meat market is expected to be valued at \$1.1548 billion in 2024. It will reach an estimated \$3.8106 billion by 2033, supported by a robust compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.19% from 2024 to 2033 (Research and Markets, 2024).

Cultured meat has the potential to revolutionise the meat industry and has prompted growing debate regarding its potential advantages and drawbacks (Treich, 2021). Advocates argue that it is more sustainable, more ethical, and healthier than traditional meat, given its significant reduction in gas emissions and water pollution. Moreover, it also improves animal welfare and offers high-quality product food (Beeker *et al.*, 2017; Bierbaul *et al.*, 2020). These foods are produced from cells obtained from live animals and then cultured in the laboratory (Bhat and Fayaz, 2011; Edelman *et al.*, 2005; Moritz *et al.*, 2015). This method of meat production offers multiple advantages, such as higher saturated fat intake, reduced food-borne diseases, lower environmental impact, and greater social responsibility (Edelman *et al.*, 2005). It is an upcoming source of protein and a viable option for people who prefer vegetarian and vegan diets (Milman, 2023). Thus, cultured meat benefits humans, animals, and the environment.

Regarding the environment, this production method reduces the need for water, land, and energy compared to traditional meat production methods (Reis *et al.*, 2020; Tuomisto and Teixeira De Mattos, 2011). On the level of social responsibility, this production contributes to overcoming the problems of world hunger, as highlighted by Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG), resulting from the continued growth of the population, which will reach 9.7 billion people in 2050 and, consequently, will require an increase in food production of at least 70 percent compared to today (Pilařová *et al.*, 2022). Conversely, critics assert that it remains unsafe and uneconomical and may harm human health and the environment (Tuomisto and Teixeira De Mattos, 2011).

Widespread use of the Internet and digital platforms has intensified the debate on cultured meat. Digital advancements have significantly transformed how consumers interact and communicate with organisations and one another (Austin *et al.*, 2020; Van der Meer and Jin, 2022). Stakeholders increasingly express their opinions and requests or launch petitions through digital platforms, exposing other stakeholders to specific challenges involving distinct organisations (Rim *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, there has been a surge in digital social activism, which carries the risk of being swayed by media sensationalism and fake news (Austin *et al.*, 2020; Van der Meer and Jin, 2022). These factors can foster public distrust of the entire industry, thereby tarnishing companies' reputations. In this context, the term 'paracrisis' is used to describe

challenges or threats which, if not properly managed, monitored, and identified, can escalate into full-blown crises (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a), negatively impacting an organisation's corporate image and brand reputation (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014; Smith and Smith, 2022). Essentially, a paracrisis represents a situation in which unfavourable public opinion or criticism puts an organisation's reputation at stake because of controversial issues or perceived misconduct. Despite ongoing debate (Goodwin and Shoulders, 2013; Hopkins and Dacey, 2008; Stephens *et al.*, 2018), the cultured meat industry remains largely unfamiliar, suggesting that not all aspects are widely understood (Tomiyama *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, crafting effective communication strategies is crucial (Meyers and Abrams, 2010) for raising awareness and clarifying misconceptions.

It is well known that consumers rely on media sources in the food industry for information and guidance concerning food-related issues and risks (Bell and Marshall, 2003; Henderson *et al.*, 2017). Managers in this industry must be cognizant of the considerable media attention paid to cultured meat (Meyers and Abrams, 2010). The industry's future and popularity hinge on consumer opinions of its products, including on digital platforms (Goodwin and Shoulders, 2013). Manufacturers' increased online visibility has, in turn, prompted more significant criticism and scepticism from stakeholders due to ethical, sustainability, and technological concerns (Quinton, 2013). Despite the rise in paracrisis situations, most organisations must prepare to tackle such predicaments and unfolding scenarios on digital platforms (Chen, 2022). Few studies have focused on the crisis-prevention phase, which involves monitoring the digital sphere and identifying potential warning signs that may foreshadow impending crises (Chen, 2022; Chen and Holladay, 2023). Constant monitoring and preparation activities may not prevent the onset of a paracrisis. Therefore, implementing a communication strategy capable of responding adequately is needed. Finally, the case under study seems of great interest because the paracrisis concerns not a single company but an entire industry. Based on these considerations, the following research question emerged:

RQ: How can communication strategies effectively mitigate a paracrisis and minimise the negative impacts of its escalation into a crisis?

This study outlines the communication strategies companies use to deal with online debates by conducting content analysis using NVivo 14 software. In addition to assessing the effectiveness of these strategies, considering certain KPIs, such as the number of reactions achieved, the study also aims to explore the comments made by the public on corporate communication to understand their position and the main concerns raised.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The second section consists of a literature review of the concept of paracrisis and its manifestation within the digital landscape as well as potential communication strategies in facing paracrisis. The third section outlines the methodology, which is a multiple case study approach, and presents the four selected cases, offering a review of the primary evidence of communication strategies implemented on social media. The fourth section presents the main findings, and the fifth section discusses the results. The manuscript concludes with the

2. Literature review

2.1 Paracrisis and digital arena

Digital platforms are where ‘firestorms’ can be generated, that is, an escalation of user-generated content in a short period that can threaten a brand’s reputation (Hansen *et al.*, 2018). This phenomenon can present exaggerated risks with ‘little actual economic significance... in the long run’ (Hansen *et al.*, 2018, pp. 558). This makes the distinction between critical situations and actual crises complex, so instead of the term ‘firestorm’, the concept of ‘paracrisis’, developed by Coombs and Holladay (2012a), has evolved. According to Coombs and Holladay, a paracrisis is ‘a publicly visible crisis threat that accuses an organisation of irresponsible or unethical behaviour’ (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a, pp.409). The term refers to a situation that is very similar to a crisis and may pose a threat. Such situations can be identified by considering the warning signals generated by various communication tools (Smith and Smith, 2022). Paracrisis threaten reputation and can take the form of high-profile public denunciations, boycotts, or firestorms (Hansen *et al.*, 2018; Lim, 2017). A particular type of paracrisis, which is very complex to manage, is challenge paracrisis, namely, the emergence of multiple online voices accusing the organisation of irresponsible behaviour (Castelló *et al.*, 2013; Lerbinger, 1997). Social media can exacerbate this by elevating public communication interactions and negative emotional reactions towards the organisation (Roh, 2017). Thus, a paracrisis can result from criticism expressed by users of messages conveyed by organisations on different communication channels. This activity is hazardous as it can generate negative electronic word-of-mouth (nWOM), which is highly detrimental to the organisation (Honisch and Más Manchón, 2020). With the development and spread of digital platforms, organisations must carefully monitor the narratives created around their brands to prevent potential crises (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a; Honisch and Más Manchón, 2020). As a potential crisis threat, practices can become prodromal crises and the prevention phase of crisis management (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a; Fink, 1986).

The crisis prevention phase emphasises the crucial role of scanning the external environment, which is beneficial for identifying warning signs and emerging threats (Heath and Nelson, 1986; Heath and Palenchar, 2009). Unlike a crisis, in which a prompt organisational response is recommended, immediate and explicit statements are not desirable in a paracrisis. A paracrisis might be noticed if it is recognised only by a small community of stakeholders and thus does not go viral. A paracrisis could stop quickly as users are subject to constant distractions and have such information overload that their attention spans shrink considerably (Chen, 2022). Therefore, once a threat is identified, it is necessary to understand whether and how to deal with it (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a). A

premature declaration by the organisation could generate unwanted public attention on a specific event (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, managers should monitor the evolution of a paracrisis to determine when direct responses are needed, in which case proactive communication strategies should be developed and implemented (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a; Jaques, 2010). The time evolution may involve multiple communication channels. Even when traditional media coverage is exhausted, discussions may shift and persist longer on social media (Moretti and Tuan, 2015).

A paracrisis becomes a crisis when 'the concern becomes evident and attractive to a range of stakeholders' (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a, pp. 408). In this situation, a paracrisis poses a significant threat to corporate reputation. More specifically, negative statements and comments developed by the public against an organisation can undermine the brand's reputation. Reputation is derived from the information the public learns about an organisation through direct communication produced by the organisation itself and indirect communication provided by other sources of information (Deephouse, 2000; Fombrun and van Riel, 2004; Wartick, 1992; Watson, 2007). Therefore, companies should not underestimate rumours spread through social media, as they may result in negative product judgment. This, in turn, can reduce purchase intention and, thus, sales, turnover, and overall reputation (Chun *et al.*, 2005; Siomkos and Kurzbard, 1994). Therefore, organisations should not ignore the role of social media in reinforcing public narratives and amplifying the potential negative effects (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Lyon and Montgomery, 2013; Phang *et al.*, 2013). Several authors support the relationship between corporate performance and reputation (Brown and Perry, 1994; Carmeli and Tishler, 2005; Pires and Trez, 2018).

The debate around cultured meat takes on the characteristics of a paracrisis when one considers the growing attention on the topic, the potential risks for producers, and numerous negative narratives. Debate is developing within what has been termed the rhetorical arena (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017), namely, a multi-stakeholder dialogue space in which communication processes concern multiple actors and not only the organisation to which the 'crisis' is attributable. According to the authors, the subjects of the arena, in addition to the organisations involved (protagonists), are political actors and public authorities (antagonists), activists and stakeholder groups (claimants), experts and the media (commentators) (cf. Splendiani, 2022). The rhetorical arena must be regarded as the centre of the analysis, within which various actors dialogue by adopting a multi-vocal approach (Seeger and Sellnow, 2016).

Once a threat is identified, the organisation must engage with stakeholders to buffer the situation and minimise potential negative effects (Lee and Lee, 2021). In the social media landscape, it is essential to assess the importance and salience of stakeholders in terms of their power, legitimacy, and urgency. Stakeholders have power when they can harm the organisation if it does not comply with their wishes. Legitimacy represents whether others consider the action requested by the stakeholder group to be desirable or appropriate. Urgency measures the stakeholders' willingness to act (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). In evaluating a paracrisis, legitimacy is crucial

because if the criticised problem behaviour is illegitimate, public opinion will not be attracted to it and will not support the paracrisis. In this case, the company has no fear. On the other hand, crisis managers will have to worry when there is a strong link between problematic organisational behaviour and stakeholders' negative evaluation of such behaviour (Coombs, 1992; Coombs and Holladay, 2007, 2012b). To determine whether other stakeholders will support this claim, it is necessary to understand whether the problem concerns values that are important to the public (Edelman, 1964; Graber, 1976).

The trajectory of a paracrisis is derived from the quantity and value of messages transmitted through traditional and social channels (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a). The quantity is represented by the number of messages sent, which, as it grows, demonstrates solid public attention. The value of messages lies in the number of viewers that the communication can reach, which is intensified by using different media (Moons *et al.*, 2009).

2.2 Strategies for overcoming a paracrisis

According to Coombs and Holladay (2015), an organisation can respond to paracrisis using six response strategies (Tab. 1): refusal, refutation, repression, recognition, revision, and reform (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). Refusal occurs when an organisation intends to ignore a challenge and refuses to respond. Refutation occurs when an organisation considers a challenge to be invalid. Repression represents organisational efforts to limit the spread of a challenge, which is particularly important in the digital arena, in which information, rumours, and misinformation can circulate very quickly. Recognition occurs when the organisation recognises the problem but does not change its behaviour, whereas revision is the strategy by which the organisation makes changes in line with the demands that have emerged from opposing parties. The reform strategy, on the other hand, represents the realisation of the change requested by the challenger (Coombs and Holladay, 2015).

Proactive communication is essential to prevent potential threats and mitigate their negative effects (Coombs, 2018). Ideally, such effects are contained in organisational responses to public questions and criticisms expressed on digital platforms (Claeys and Ogenhaffen, 2016). Several proactive communication strategies such as strategic silence, supportive PR, and inoculation can be adopted. Strategic silence is defined as the deliberate absence of organisational communication (Le *et al.*, 2019); the strategy of supportive PR involves the communication of positive arguments aimed at reinforcing favourable attitudes towards the company, generating a buffer to be used in negative situations (Wan and Pfau, 2004); inoculation is the use of warning messages that are less likely to persuade the recipient and make them more resistant to persuasive attacks (Boman and Schneider, 2021). The fourth proactive strategy used in the literature is scene stealing (Arpan and Pompper, 2003). As this mechanism induces the disclosure of a weakness or failure before a third party announces it, it is not always considered appropriate (Boman and Schneider, 2021).

Tab. 1: Paracrisis response strategies

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Main Strategy	Strategy	Description	References
Response strategy	Refusal	Crisis denial	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
	Refutation	“The problem does not exist”. The organisation responds by denying and providing evidence.	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
	Repression	The organisation aims to stop the paracrisis from the beginning through a lawsuit.	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
	Recognition	The organisation recognises the problem	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
	Revision	Implementation of changes	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
	Reform	Promoting change	Coombs and Holladay, 2015
Proactive communication strategies	Strategic silence	No responses	Le <i>et al.</i> , 2019
	Supportive PR	The organisation communicates positive arguments aimed at reinforcing favourable attitudes	Wan and Pfau, 2004
	Inoculation or pre-bunking	The use of warning messages against fake news	Boman and Schneider, 2021; McGuire, 1970
	Scene-stealing	The organisation declares a weakness before it emerges from third parties	Arpan and Pompper, 2003

Source: Our elaboration

In addition to the choice of strategy, the communication channels and parties involved must match. Communication tactics on social media, in the case of a paracrisis, should follow three best practices: (1) be where the action is, that is, respond to the channels in which the paracrisis has occurred; (2) be present before the paracrisis occurs, that is, the need to build credibility and a certain number of followers before negative rumours develop (Safko and Brake, 2009); and (3) be redundant, that is, use several communication channels, traditional and social, even overlapping each other. If redundancy is not excessive, it positively affects exposure and persuasion (Moons *et al.*, 2009).

Drawing on studies on crisis communication response strategies (Coombs 2007), it is crucial that organisations present ‘their side of the story’ or can represent the main voice on the topic to provide the ‘official version’. Therefore, organisations must be able to systematically disseminate accurate, truthful, and timely information, avoiding inaccurate and unreliable news that will soon fill the information gap (Kara, 2019).

Hence, to overcome moments of crisis quickly, companies must invest considerable resources in advertising and communication campaigns to strengthen their brand image and credibility. These initiatives entail considerable effort in terms of costs and developing a coherent organisational strategy because managerial change may require costly modification of business practices. However, the cost of reputational damage is difficult to calculate and can be much higher. Therefore, if a paracrisis poses a real threat, the organisation must be willing to spend money to change the situation. Managers are justified in resisting change when costs are high and/or actions are inconsistent with long-term corporate objectives (Coombs and Holladay, 2012a).

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted was a multiple-case study. Multiple case studies are an appropriate research method for building theory as they combine knowledge from previous publications and collect data from selected companies. Therefore, it is a particularly suitable methodology for investigating complex social phenomena (Simons, 2009), such as the cultured meat industry, which incorporates social, ethical, and environmental issues. The ability to provide practical evidence from more than one business case enables a comparison of communication strategies and adds value to the literature (Yin, 2017). The cases explored allow for a holistic view of contemporary phenomena, providing a deeper understanding of the communication strategies employed in this industry.

3.1 Research context

The research context concerns the debate around the emerging cultured meat industry, taken into consideration because it presents the traits of a paracrisis, that is, a creeping crisis with potentially harmful effects on the image of not just a single company but of all companies operating in the industry. This debate has seen its most remarkable escalation across digital platforms, particularly on Facebook, where proponents and opponents of cultured meat have been very quick to post content using the hashtags #culturedmeat, #labgrownmeat, and #cellbasedmeat.

The debate has been fuelled by younger generations, highly educated people, and those from developed countries showing increasing interest in this food (Tomiyaama *et al.*, 2020; Van Loo *et al.*, 2020). However, other consumers remain wary of consuming cultured meat because it is perceived as highly technological (Chraki *et al.*, 2021) and inauthentic (Bryant and Barnett, 2018). Contrarian attitudes towards cultured meat production result in distrust of cultured meat producers and widespread critical discussions on digital platforms (Bryant and Barnett, 2018). These contrarian and negative attitudes also stem from government positions in some countries, such as Italy, which allow the import of these products but not their production (Cappellini, 2023). The only countries where retail trade has been allowed thus far are Singapore and the United States. In these contexts, generating contrary stakeholder movements is easy and has led to the creation of communication that increases public scepticism and concern. For this reason, startups and innovative cultured meat companies, which have emerged worldwide, are working to overcome the many challenges the industry presents in terms of regulation, public acceptance, and reducing production costs to ensure greater accessibility of the product for all segments of the population (Maci, 2023).

3.2 Case Study Selection

This study provides a purposive sample to select the most representative producers for the study objectives. Purposive sampling allows for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon than probability sampling, especially considering the limited number of cases (Marshall and Rossman, 1995).

According to the Good Food Institute (GFI, 2023), 174 organisations were counted among the many emerging actors in 2023. The study only considers companies that market and produce exclusively cultivated meat. Four cases were selected among the leading actors identified because they actively communicate on Facebook, which is the main place for debate on the topic.

- *Company A*: Founded in 2015 and based in Berkeley, California, Company A is a pioneer in cultured meat production. In 2022, it became the first company to receive safety certification from the FDA for cultured chicken. The company has an innovative production centre in California, and the cultured chicken was first sold to the public in July 2023.
- *Company B*: Company B is part of Eat Just, Inc., and was founded in 2016. It was the first company to sell cultured meat globally, with licenses in Singapore and the US. Their cultured chicken is available in high-end restaurants and through deliveries. The company aims to create a safer and more sustainable food system.
- *Company C*: Company C was founded in Jerusalem in 2018 and is a leading producer of cultured meat. Specialising in chicken meat, it opened the world's largest cultured meat production facility, located in Wilson, North Carolina. The organisation aims to make meat affordable, sustainable, and antibiotic-free through advanced technology that does not require animal slaughter.
- *Company D*: Founded in 2016 in the Netherlands, Company D is a pioneer of cultured beef production. This company created the world's first cultured beef burger and has continued to develop technologies to reduce production costs. The company aims to commercialise cultured meat on a large scale within a few years, with a focus on sustainability and animal welfare.

Table 2 provides an overview of the four selected companies in terms of headquarters, year of foundation, and number of employees.

Tab. 2: Company description

Companies	Headquarter	Foundation year	Employees
Company A	Berkeley, California	2015	198
Company B	Alameda, California	2016	130
Company C	Jerusalem, Israel	2018	100
Company D	Maastricht, The Netherlands	2016	80

Source: Our elaboration of information extracted from company websites

3.3 Data collection and data analysis

The first step was to collect all posts published on Facebook by the four cases studied in one year (e.g. June 2023-June 2024) to analyse the communication strategies conveyed by the companies on social media.

We conducted manual collection on the Facebook pages of the four companies, collecting 129 posts/communications focusing on aspects related to cultured meat and its promotion in the market. In addition to

the text of the communication, additional information was collected such as the number of public reactions and the number and text of comments written by the public in response to company posts.

In the second phase, the company posts were analysed through content analysis using the NVivo 14 software. Corporate communication scholars primarily apply this method because it is a systematic and reproducible methodology for analysing textual data (Krippendorff, 2018). This analysis involved coding the extracted textual units according to the theoretical framework presented in Table 1. All authors coded all textual units, and the researchers only engaged with each other in cases of disagreement. Each textual unit was coded according to strategic responses and proactive communication, opting for multiple codes when communication was suitable for multiple objectives, especially considering that corporate communication has often been very long and wordy. The coding of textual units also explored the keywords most frequently used in corporate communications.

In the third and final step, we assessed the effectiveness of corporate communication by considering KPIs related to audience engagement, such as the number of reactions and comments elicited (Wang and Zhuang, 2017). In addition, textual coding of public comments was conducted to catalogue the main issues and concerns that emerged from the online debate on cultured meat in response to corporate communication strategies.

Table 3 summarises the methodological approach adopted in these three steps.

Tab. 3: Process of data collection and data analysis

Step 1 - Collection of social media posts
A. Manual extraction of all posts published by companies in the last 12 months (June 2023-June 2024)
B. In-depth observation of all posts by researchers in order to create a corpus/document/database
Step 2 - Text mining analysis
C. Analysis of the most frequent words using text mining software Nvivo
C. In-depth observation of posts by researchers in order to encode them based on their purpose
Step 3 - Assessment of social media publishing activity
E. Identification of Social Media KPIs
E. Evaluation of social media activity based on the categories of messages
E. Analysis of the comments on the posts

Source: Our elaboration

4. Results

4.1 Overview of corporate communication on Facebook

A total of 129 posts were collected and distributed as follows: 57 (44.18%) from Company B, 46 (35.65%) from Company A, 17 (13.17%) from Company C, and nine (6.99%) from Company D.

The coding carried out on the company posts showed that the most frequent words within the company communication were the following: 1) 'meat' with 3.36%, 2) 'cultivated' with 2.88%, 3) 'chicken' with 2.12%,

Among proactive communication strategies, the most widely used is ‘Supportive PR’, which emphasises the use of these products by celebrities and external parties and their promotion by other supporters. Within this category, companies communicated their commitment to creating synergies with other organisations and planning events to increase the notoriety of the product and expand the audience. Concerning this objective, organisations also offered opportunities to taste their products free of charge.

The third most frequently used strategy is the ‘Revision’ strategy, whereby companies make revisions in their communication to convey transparent information about their products and processes to educate the public, which is still poorly informed regarding the product. This communication aims to emphasise quality, safety, and compliance with high standards. The messages emphasise the work and dedication of experts within the company team, whose passion and precision are dedicated to ensuring the highest quality, larger capacity, and better taste.

Finally, the ‘Recognition’ strategy boasts, for example, the first marketing of the product in certain establishments or the use of products in renowned outlets such as Michelin Guide restaurants. In this category, messages regarding certifications acquired by companies to overcome specific problems were collected. The ‘Refutation’ strategy is focused on rejecting untrue information and news that can cast a negative light on the company’s work, leading us to reflect on how certain behaviours, even political ones, could limit the technological and innovative development of the industry. The latter strategy has mainly been used in the face of politically induced regulations and forces related to agricultural lobbying.

Table 4 shows that the ‘Reform’ strategy, which was the most used by all of the companies analysed, and the ‘Revision’ strategy reached their highest percentage for Company C, respectively equal to 49.04% and 22.68%. Company D, on the other hand, found the highest percentage for the ‘Supportive PR’ strategy equal to 36.24%. The other three proactive communication strategies, that is, strategic silence, scene-stealing, and inoculation, were not used at all by the four companies analysed.

Tab. 4: Distribution of communication strategies among organisations

	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D
Refusal	0.00%	1.49%	0.00%	0.00%
Refutation	5.95%	9.91%	10.22%	0.00%
Repression	4.37%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Recognition	4.58%	23.13%	16.77%	16.01%
Revision	18.05%	10.04%	22.68%	7.87%
Reform	47.78%	23.95%	49.04%	39.89%
Supportive PR	19.27%	31.48%	1.28%	36.24%
Strategic Silence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Scene-stealing	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Inoculation	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: our elaboration

Table 5 shows that the communication strategies most appreciated by the public, considering the highest average of reactions achieved, were the ‘Revision’ strategies, with a value of 34.82, the ‘Supportive PR’ strategies, with a value of 31.56%, and the ‘Reform’ strategies, with a value of 30.22, all values that are higher than the overall average of 29.22. This reveals how the public appreciated communications that focused primarily on educating the public, transparency of the products and processes carried out, and the standards met.

Tab. 5: Average number of reactions per strategy

Communication Strategy	Average Number of Reactions
Recognition	26.15
Reform	30.22
Refusal	7.00
Refutation	14.55
Repression	22.00
Revision	34.82
Supportive PR	31.56
Total	29.22

Source: our elaboration

4.2 Overview of the main concerns raised by the audience

The comments on the collected posts totalled 383, divided as follows: 239 (62.40%) in response to Company A’s posts, 95 (24.80%) in response to Company B’s posts, 25 (6.52%) in response to Company D’s posts, and 24 (6.26%) in response to Company C’s posts.

Table 6 shows how public comments were particularly divided between optimists and sceptics about cultured meat, with leading shares of 29.84% and 21.54%. The former includes optimistic messages, that is, eagerness to try the products, waiting to find the product in a shop, and trust in a better future for the industry. In contrast, sceptical messages include all messages that are particularly pessimistic about machine-created products, reluctance, and distrust of cultured meat.

Leaving aside this opposition of opinions, public comments highlighted the request for more product information for 12.94%, for example, availability and concerns regarding the safety of production processes such as where and how the products are produced accounting for 6.17 % as well as comments focused on regulatory aspects, such as production and marketing bans implemented in certain countries, accounting for 5.97%. A significant percentage were categorised as ‘Other’, namely, residual items. More limited were comments related to ‘respect for animals’, in which the public claims to prefer to consume this product to respect animals and avoid barbarism, at 3.81%; aspects related to ‘taste’, as some claim that the taste of the product is still not satisfactory, at 3.59%; aspects related to food diets, such as whether the products having been extracted from animal cells corresponds to the needs of vegan and vegetarian diets, at 2.62%; aspects related to ‘price’ regarding the excessively high price, which renders the product largely unaffordable, at 1.19%; and aspects related to other

unresolved ‘environmental concerns’, such as packaging and emissions from production, at 1.00%.

Tab. 6: Comment topics and distribution among companies

Comments	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Total
Diet (vegetarian, vegan, etc.)	1.91%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%	2.62%
Environmental concerns	0.96%	0.00%	5.71%	0.00%	1.00%
Information	13.69%	12.61%	8.57%	11.90%	12.94%
Optimism	35.03%	31.53%	2.86%	9.52%	29.84%
Other	5.73%	16.22%	0.00%	50.00%	11.33%
Price	1.91%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.19%
Regulation	7.01%	6.31%	0.00%	2.38%	5.97%
Respect for animals	1.91%	6.31%	14.29%	2.38%	3.81%
Safety concerns	6.69%	5.41%	5.71%	4.76%	6.17%
Skepticism	21.66%	17.12%	37.14%	19.05%	21.54%
Taste	3.50%	4.50%	5.71%	0.00%	3.59%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: our elaboration

Table 7 reflects how ‘Refusal’ messages triggered particularly sceptical and regulation-based public comments. Concerning ‘Refutation’ messages, the comments focus on the issues and doubts concerning the safety of ingredients as well as processes and regulations. ‘Repression’ strategies generated curiosity and enquiries from the public and debate around regulation aspects. Regarding the ‘Recognition’ strategies, comments were mostly sceptical, whereas with the ‘Revision’, ‘Reform’, and ‘Supportive PR’ strategies, comments were very optimistic. The latter strategy has been the one most likely to generate optimism among the public and debate over the possibility of respecting animals by consuming these products.

Tab. 7: Comment topics and distribution among main strategies

Comments	Refusal	Refutation	Repression	Recognition	Revision	Reform	Supportive PR	Total
Diet (vegetarian, vegan, etc.)	0.00%	4.35%	0.00%	3.0%	3.33%	2.49%	1.23%	2.59%
Environmental concerns	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.5%	0.83%	1.49%	0.00%	1.00%
Information	0.00%	4.35%	14.29%	10.6%	15.83%	13.43%	12.35%	12.55%
Optimism	0.00%	30.43%	14.29%	22.7%	31.67%	26.37%	44.44%	29.88%
Other	0.00%	8.70%	0.00%	18.2%	11.67%	12.44%	4.94%	11.35%
Price	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.0%	1.67%	1.99%	0.00%	1.20%
Regulation	50.00%	17.39%	71.43%	1.5%	2.50%	4.98%	6.17%	5.98%
Respect for animals	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	4.5%	4.17%	3.48%	4.94%	3.78%
Safety concerns	0.00%	17.39%	0.00%	4.5%	4.17%	7.46%	4.94%	5.98%
Skepticism	50.00%	17.39%	0.00%	28.8%	22.50%	20.40%	18.52%	21.51%
Taste	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	4.5%	1.67%	5.47%	2.47%	3.39%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: our elaboration

Overall, the comments were primarily optimistic, demonstrating the increased responsibility of the public and a strong desire to consume these

products to have a more sustainable and ethical diet. However, there is still scepticism among the public regarding the lack of knowledge regarding the product, its regulatory aspects, and the excessively high price that makes consumption difficult. Because the public still knows little about the product, many of the comments are questions posed to the company by the public to gather more information for accurate assessment. Therefore, organisations must respond to public doubts with extreme clarity and transparency to convey confidence in their purchases, for example, by highlighting the use of clear labels and compliance with high technological and quality standards.

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5. Discussion

Therefore, the analysed organisations responded to the escalation of online communication and debate, as demonstrated by the increasing number of hashtags on the topic, by actively communicating on the social media platform Facebook. Thus, all the analysed organisations recognised the problem and adopted communication strategies aimed at bridging the information gap, educating the public, creating good synergy, and attempting to convey accurate, rich, and detailed messages to foster transparency and public trust (Safko and Brake, 2009).

The three communication strategies most implemented by organisations were 'Reform' (Coombs and Holladay, 2015), 'Supportive PR' (Wan and Pfau, 2004), and 'Review' (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). These strategies proved to be the most effective, as they generated the highest number of audience reactions, demonstrating some involvement, and the highest rates of optimistic comments towards adopting the product. Optimistic comments were exceptionally high in frequency due to the company's proactive 'Supportive PR' strategy, which was aimed at enhancing the product through third parties such as celebrities, influencers, and other external parties, creating synergies and partnerships with organisations and universities, as well as enhancing the creation of events aimed at promoting and publicising the product to a wider audience. Therefore, these three strategies succeeded in generating positive WOM among the public by minimising the potential negative effects of the paracrisis, whereas the 'Refusal' strategy with which the main sceptical comments were associated favoured the spread of negative WOM.

The 'Reform', 'Supportive PR', and 'Revision' strategies thus demonstrate how organisations were ready to take proactive measures to avoid the generation of a full-blown crisis. The generation of positive WOM, that is, optimistic comments, highlights the public's appreciation of the company's commitment. Organisations were attentive in responding to consumer needs, strengthening trust, and improving the company's public perception. Transparency and clear communication also foster public appreciation, reinforce trust, and mitigate potential reputational damage (Coombs, 2007; Dowling, 2006; Homburg *et al.*, 2013).

The company that communicated the most with the public was Company B, but public interaction was much higher for Company A. Thus,

Company B seems to have been penalised by the public for its greater use of 'Refusal', 'Refutation', and 'Recognition' strategies, which proved less positive in generating public engagement and involvement as they are aimed at rejecting the existence of a crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2015).

On the other hand, the 'Supportive PR' strategy was particularly appreciated by the public as it involved using influencers known and liked by the public, a tool that enhanced credibility and nurtured corporate reputation, limiting negative electronic WOM in favour of positive. At the same time, the other three proposed proactive communication strategies of strategic silence, inoculation, and scene stealing were not used (Le *et al.*, 2019; Boman and Schneider, 2021; McGuire, 1970; Arpan and Pompper, 2003).

6. Theoretical and managerial implications

This study enriches the literature on strategic communication for containing and minimising the effects of a potential crisis. As Schermer (2021) demonstrated, the constructs proposed in the literature to overcome reputational crises often need to be revised because of the unique nature of each crisis and the need to consider the roles of many stakeholders. This multidisciplinary field involves multiple actors (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). In the participatory culture in which we live, these actors, such as consumers and citizens, play an increasingly active role in communicating with organisations, gathering information from various sources, and spreading their voices. These aspects can influence the reputation of a brand and the behaviour of other consumers (Jenkins, 2006). This makes relations between organisations and stakeholders particularly crucial but, at the same time, much more complex than in the past and more fragile to maintain over time, requiring considerable effort on the part of organisations. Therefore, strategic communication has become a critical organisational asset for survival. The objective of strategic communication must be to defend an organisation's legitimacy within society. Strategic communication plays a role in directing social change and public behaviour (Falkheimer, 2014).

This study has several pragmatic implications for meat industry managers and professionals. First, it emphasises the imperative nature of constantly monitoring digital platforms to identify potential threats and challenges. Equally critical is the recognition and involvement of influential stakeholders-the increasingly active and responsible public-who can exert substantial influence on the trajectory of a paracrisis. In this context, an organisation's strategic communication can prevent and mitigate the negative effects of a paracrisis from degenerating into a crisis. A noteworthy implication of this research concerns the role of social media platforms, such as Facebook, in amplifying the voices and debates of supporters and detractors. The ability to respond promptly and effectively on this platform is crucial for companies that must establish their social media presence in advance of any potential paracrisis. Among the strategies implemented, 'Refusal' strategies appear to be ineffective at minimising harm as they arouse scepticism in the public and lower involvement. In contrast, the use

of 'Revision', 'Reform', and 'Supportive PR' communication strategies fuel optimism and thus positive WOM in the public as well as ensuring high involvement. Thus, these strategies can help create a good corporate image, foster product adoption, build public trust, and communicate a company's commitment to pursuing future challenges in the cultured meat industry in terms of sustainability and ethical compliance.

Second, communication strategies aimed at emphasising the positive contributions that companies have made to society aim to reduce negative rumours, playing on corporate credibility, brand image, and corporate reputation. Communication aimed at spreading companies' commitment to social responsibility positively influences brand credibility, equity, and reputation (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). A growing body of academic research attests to the wide range of benefits a company can gain by demonstrating its commitment to CSR (Du *et al.*, 2007; Sen, 2006). Communication that raises public awareness of environmental and social issues makes it easier for a company to maintain its corporate reputation over time (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008), making it a precious resource in the event of crises and scandals.

Detailed and transparent communication aimed at educating and informing the public about a particularly innovative and unknown industry such as cultured meat, contributes to increasing the public's perceived quality of the product, obtaining greater trust, and, thus, increasing purchase intentions (Rodríguez Escobar *et al.*, 2021). Communication can improve consumers' perception of a company's reliability and product quality, making them more likely to purchase and consume the product (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). In addition to creating greater public awareness, transparent communication strategies help counteract the scepticism and reluctance of other stakeholders (Du *et al.*, 2010).

Because the paracrisis analysed in this study affects the entire industry, various operators and associations should collaborate and coordinate their work to promote the future development of cultured meat, which can advance the arguments of the entire sector to overcome extreme regulatory constraints.

7. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This study explored the intricate dynamics of strategic communication in the cultured meat industry, focusing on preventing paracrisis and mitigating its potential negative effects.

Proactive strategic communication is a valuable resource for organisations, as it enables them to shape narratives, counter misconceptions, and pre-emptively address debates and disputes. Research findings that highlight the importance of transparent communication aimed at educating and raising awareness offer useful guidance to companies wishing to strengthen their credibility and resilience during future crises. Communication strategies must be adapted to the power, legitimacy, and urgency of stakeholders as these factors significantly influence public perception and support. The power of the public, which

is increasingly sensitive to and responsible for these issues, has increased over time and tends to largely influence and condition corporate actions.

Therefore, this research identified the communication strategies of leading companies in this growing sector while assessing the implications of public interaction and debate through an exploratory methodology involving multiple case studies and content analysis using NVivo 14 software. This led to the delineation of the most effective communication strategies for generating optimistic commentary and higher engagement with the public, which are central to navigating online debates in an industry characterised by innovation, a high degree of ethical consideration, health implications, and strong environmental concerns.

Communication strategies should not only inform and educate the public but also aim to create an emotional narrative to disseminate and raise awareness of the diverse opportunities that this industry holds.

Finally, the research highlights the relevance and necessity of effective strategic communication as the cultured meat industry evolves, communication that must ensure that various obstacles such as regulatory limitations and consumer scepticism are overcome. Therefore, the effective use of strategic communication can be a powerful tool to contain possible crises, cultivate favourable stakeholder relations, and ensure trust with the public in an ever-changing landscape. Therefore, in an era in which more transparency and control are demanded, strategic communication has become an indispensable resource for organisations seeking to thrive in this digital transformation environment.

However, it is essential to recognise the limitations of this study. The scope of the study was limited by its small sample size, which included only four companies, thus limiting the generalisability of the results. Therefore, future research should expand the sample size to include more companies. In addition, future studies could attempt to overcome the subjectivity of content analysis, which is already limited and minimised through coding by all authors involved in the study.

Furthermore, future studies could examine different social platforms to highlight potential differences in online engagement and debates, especially among younger generations, such as Generation Z, who represent audiences particularly sensitive to environmental and social issues.

The use of quantitative research methodologies would allow for the measurement of the impact of proactive strategic communication on key business metrics such as reputation and financial performance, enabling a deeper understanding of the benefits associated with strategic and proactive communication.

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Antifragile crisis communication: an exploratory study

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Abstract

Framing of the research: In today's volatile and complex business environment, organizations face challenges that demand new adaptation and communication capabilities. Organizational management is increasingly exposed to disruptions and crises that test the traditional approaches to crisis communication and strategy.

Purpose of the paper: This paper explores the concept of antifragility and its application to crisis communication in this environment of perpetual disruptions and uncertainty.

Methodology: Qualitative research methodology was employed, involving 22 in-depth interviews with industry professionals. Data was analyzed using grounded theory and theories-in-use approaches.

Findings: The study identified six critical factors for antifragile crisis communication: experimentation, option generation, stress, redundancy, subtraction, and creativity. These factors contribute to an organization's ability to thrive in the face of ongoing disruptions, aligning with the principles of antifragility.

Research limits: The research is based on qualitative data from a specific set of participants and may not be fully generalizable. Further quantitative research could validate these findings.

Practical implications: Organizations can enhance their crisis communication strategies by integrating the identified factors, promoting adaptability, and leveraging uncertainty to thrive in the new business environment.

Originality of the paper: This research offers a novel perspective by applying antifragility principles to crisis communication, bridging the gap in existing literature and providing valuable insights into managing crises in the contemporary business landscape.

Key words: antifragility; crisis communication; uncertainty; strategic communication

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of organizational management, organizations cannot escape the danger of crisis and uncertainty (Alalwan *et al.*, 2021). What was once regarded as exceptional and unfortunate has now become the norm, reshaping the very fabric of how businesses and institutions operate, increasing its complexity (Hwang and Lichtenthal, 2020; Bourne, 2014). Amidst this paradigm shift, crisis communication has emerged as an indispensable cornerstone of organizational strategy (Steyn and Niemann, 2010; Ruler, 2018; Fenton and Langley, 2011; Steyn,

2004). The ability to navigate complex environments, manage crises, and communicate effectively in their wake has become not merely advantageous but imperative for survival (Coombs, 2015; Coombs, 2007; Kim, 2018; Khan *et al.*, 2017).

Because of escalating uncertainty, crisis managers have often resorted to the strategy of seeking control and predictability according to the phenomenon of Intolerance of Uncertainty (Dugas *et al.*, 2004). This inclination towards risk mitigation and information collection (Jia *et al.*, 2020), often paired with meticulous analysis and overreaction, has, paradoxically, led to increased difficulties for organizations facing adversity (Gilbert and Bower, 2002). It leads to what can be described as “information overload”-an inundation of data that drowns the decision-making process and fosters a fertile ground for cognitive biases (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). These biases, deeply ingrained in human psychology, can disorient the judgments and actions that managers take, often with adverse consequences (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986).

Historically, in the discipline of crisis management, the establishment of control mechanisms, adherence to rigid rules, exhaustive planning, and the cultivation of hyper-specialized expertise have been the bastions of an organization’s resilience (Fink, 1986). These tried-and-tested strategies offer solace when confronting known and calculable risks. However, the current crisis environment, characterized by its complex and volatile nature, demands a reevaluation of conventional wisdom.

More recent research in crisis management and communication (Jin *et al.*, 2024) has furthered the understanding of the contemporary crisis landscape, highlighting how organizations are increasingly subject to new risks that are difficult to quantify-arising, e. g., from an increased involvement in issues of political or social significance (Jin *et al.*, 2024) with potential for exacerbating media scrutiny and polarization, as well as having spillover effects. Scholars are, therefore, acknowledging that the environment is becoming more complex, requiring a different approach to crisis management.

The concept of crisis READINESS (CCTT, 2023; Jin *et al.*, 2024) was developed to facilitate this new approach. READINESS is described by Jin *et al.*, (2024) as a mindset that puts organizations in the condition of being willing to actively engage with the crisis. This topic is fundamental to the challenges of “sticky crises”-severe, recurring, and complex crises that cause ripple effects, resulting in simultaneous ancillary crises and impacting organizations and industries alike (Reber *et al.*, 2021). According to this new understanding, crises require a mindset that considers approaches like self- and collective-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and crisis leadership (Coombs, 2015). However, this new approach is still anchored to the idea that a READINESS mindset should be achieved with the purpose of fighting disorder rather than embracing it.

It is against this backdrop that the concept of antifragility comes to the forefront. Coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012) in his seminal work “Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder,” antifragility represents a paradigm shift in how we perceive and approach the challenges posed by uncertainty and disruption. Unlike fragility, which denotes a susceptibility

to harm from shocks and volatility (Boguth *et al.*, 2021), antifragility signifies an entity's capacity to not only withstand such disturbances but to thrive and grow stronger in their wake (Taleb, 2012; Ritter and Pedersen, 2020).

In the context of crisis management and communication, the application of antifragility principles entails more than mere survival; it involves harnessing the chaos of crises as a catalyst for growth and improvement. The crux of antifragility lies in recognizing that the prevailing approach to risk reduction-akin to building strong fortifications-may be ill-suited to the current era of perpetual disruptions. Instead, it advocates embracing the dynamics of disorder, harnessing them to bolster an organization's ability to leverage uncertainty (Taleb, 2012).

Building on the READINESS paradigm, this research embarks on an exploratory journey into the concept of antifragile crisis communication as a strategic approach to communication during times of crisis and uncertainty that aims to strengthen the organization, surpassing mere resilience by promoting adaptability and growth in the face of adversity. To explore this construct, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How can we apply the concept of antifragility to crisis communication in order to address the new crisis environment?

RQ2: What are the key factors driving antifragility in crisis communication?

To address the research questions at hand, this study employed a qualitative research methodology to capture and collect the experiences and opinions of industry professionals through 22 in-depth interviews.

First, we reviewed existing crisis communication and management literature seeking to understand how it intersects with the evolving landscape of the business environment. This literature review lays the foundation for our research, allowing us to contextualize our findings.

Next, we conducted an examination of the concept of antifragility in the disciplines of both business management and communication literature. This in-depth analysis enabled us to connect the theoretical framework of antifragility with practical implications for crisis communication in contemporary business settings.

Subsequently, we define our research methodology, providing a clear and concise description of our data collection and analysis processes. A reference table is included to offer transparency and clarity regarding the coding of qualitative data, ensuring the rigor of our approach.

Finally, we present and discuss our research findings, in order to establish a robust connection between our exploratory study and its theoretical significance. This process allows us to articulate how our research contributes to the academic discourse on crisis communication and aligns with contemporary developments in business management. In doing so, we underscore the value of our study as a meaningful academic contribution in this field.

2. Literature review

The discipline of crisis management and communication has undergone a profound transformation in recent times, ushering in an era marked by perpetual disruptions and unrelenting uncertainty, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Sellnow and Seeger, 2021). This evolving crisis landscape demands a reevaluation of established paradigms and calls for the exploration of novel approaches that can not only endure the increasingly endemic nature of crises but harness them for growth and improvement. This theoretical framework seeks to define the conceptual foundations of antifragile crisis communication—a concept poised to adapt the way organizations confront and manage crises in a highly complex and uncertain environment.

2.1 Crisis communication in the new crisis environment

In recent years, strategic communication has garnered increasing attention (Werder *et al.*, 2020) and is recognized as a crucial skill for organizations to effectively engage with stakeholders and establish a strong reputation, which can be invaluable during crises. Zerfass *et al.*, (2020) described strategic communication as a broad array of practices designed to align an organization's communication efforts with its overall strategic objectives, ensuring consistency and coherence in messaging. This strategy not only promotes open communication channels with stakeholders but also aids in building goodwill, which can serve as a “savings account” during challenging times (Alsop, 2004).

Crisis management and communication, as an effort rooted in the reduction of risk and uncertainty (Fink, 1986) and the protection of an organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007, 2015), has long been a vital organizational function. Historically, the prevailing approach to crisis communication has hinged on the belief that crises are isolated, discrete events with well-defined beginnings and endings (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994; Richardson, 1994; Coombs, 2015). This view has given rise to stepped or phased crisis communication models, intricately linked with the conventional crisis lifecycle (Tab. 1).

The dynamics of crises have shifted, however, from episodic disruptions to a continuous state of upheaval (Motamedi, 2018) and what has been defined as “sticky crises” (Reber *et al.*, 2021). In this new crisis environment, the traditional approach to the management and communication of crises—focused on preparedness, prevention, risk management, and proactive monitoring (Carmeli and Schaubroek, 2008)—falls short when it comes to providing ways to reduce effort and increase efficiency.

The READINESS framework emphasizes the importance of preparation in fostering a READINESS mindset and approach within organizations (Jin *et al.*, 2024). According to recent scholarly contributions, advance planning alone is insufficient for success; effective training is essential for diagnosing weaknesses and developing the necessary skills to manage crises (Coombs, 2023; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018).

The READINESS framework (Jin *et al.*, 2024) demonstrates the interconnections among three key concepts in crisis management and communication: preparedness, resilience, and READINESS. Preparedness and resilience are seen as essential components that promote crisis READINESS. Corporate leaders and crisis teams need to adopt an anticipatory focus on preparedness and build resilience to develop a READINESS mindset capable of combating crisis-related disorder. Both preparedness and resilience can be enhanced through training. Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to design comprehensive training programs and engage in them regularly (Jin *et al.*, 2017). To strengthen the READINESS mindset, organizations must also assess risks and the likelihood of crises and crisis spillovers while developing emotional leadership and mental adaptability. The former is based on organizational preparedness, and the latter on organizational resilience. Organizations with a robust READINESS mindset are motivated, committed, and creative in developing systems and procedures for appropriate, sufficient, and timely crisis responses. They exhibit not only a commitment to crisis preparation but also a dedication to building organizational resilience, thereby enhancing both factors.

Although the concept of READINESS is a valuable advancement in crisis management and communication literature, we believe it may be beneficial to integrate the antifragile perspective to its study. Antifragility overcomes the limitation of striving to combat disorder, chaos, and uncertainty, offering a window on improvement thanks to the exposure to stressors and complexity. We believe many elements of the READINESS framework already overlap with fundamental aspects of antifragility, and the aim of this study is to discover which other elements should be considered to define the antifragile perspective as an organizational mindset that rethinks crisis communication methods to foster a culture of improvement in times of disruption, enhance organizational performance, adapt to changes in the external environment, and thrive in the long term.

2.2 *The antifragile perspective*

The antifragile perspective gains significance as crises are no longer isolated events but rather they have become a persistent feature of the contemporary business and social landscapes (Finn *et al.*, 2020; Alalwan *et al.*, 2021; Pettit *et al.*, 2013; Gotham and Campanella, 2010). Within this context, we consider the concept of antifragility (Taleb, 2001; Taleb, 2012) as a novel perspective through which to navigate environments characterized by unpredictability and continuous disruptions (Geldenhuis *et al.*, 2020).

Antifragility, as a concept, transcends the realm of biology (Danchin *et al.*, 2011), physics (Naji *et al.*, 2014), psychology (Jones, 2014), information systems (Gorgeon, 2015), infrastructure networks (Fang and Sansavini, 2017), and marketing literature (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020), and it extends its reach into the domain of business and management. It encapsulates a profound departure from the traditional notions of robustness and resilience (Capano and Woo, 2017; Hillmann and Guenther 2021; Munoz *et al.*, 2021). While resilience implies the ability to bounce back from adversity (Frandsen and Johansen, 2016), and robustness conveys a

capacity to withstand stressors (Hamann *et al.*, 2012; Munoz *et al.*, 2021), antifragility introduces a transformative paradigm—it encompasses the capability not only to endure but to thrive and benefit from stressors and disruptions (Taleb, 2012; Ramezani and Camarinha-Matos, 2020). In the context of business management, antifragility has been defined as the ability of organizations to respond to disruptions by transforming and adapting their business models in order to improve performance (Blečić and Cecchini 2019; Conz and Magnani 2020).

Academic research has previously investigated the factors that enable organizations and their business models to become antifragile (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020). It is important to establish robust systems and processes that can adapt and thrive in the face of adversity (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020), while supporting flexibility (Fiksel *et al.*, 2015) to maintain an organization's agility and adaptability (Branicki *et al.*, 2018). Lean structures (Gotham and Campanella, 2011), business intelligence (Pettit *et al.*, 2013), and digital technologies (Corvello *et al.*, 2022) have also been found to contribute to organizational antifragility.

Antifragility is influenced by a combination of resources and capabilities, both of which can have internal and external origins (Gimenez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Leuridan and Demil (2021) highlighted the significance of internal surplus resources in facilitating a firm's success during crises, while Klein and Todesco (2021) observed that a lack of financial resources contributed to the increased fragility of small-medium enterprises (SMEs) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to resources, skills and capabilities have been shown to impact resilience and antifragility in previous research. Factors such as technological expertise and creativity play pivotal roles in managing crises and adverse external events (Frare and Beuren 2021). Ramezani and Camarinha-Matos (2020) summarized internal skills that foster antifragility, including creativity, defined as the ability to identify opportunities during crises; adaptability or flexibility, which refers to the capacity to adapt to major changes or disruptions; and transformability, or the ability to alter processes, structures, and behaviors to survive during crises. These skills align with the concept of strategic agility, which involves identifying and adapting structures and processes to capitalize on new opportunities (Soni *et al.*, 2014; Zitzmann 2014; Carvalho *et al.*, 2012; Wieland and Wallenburg 2012). Agility has been associated with the success of SMEs in complex environments (Bianchi *et al.*, 2017; Troise *et al.*, 2022) and is expected to promote antifragility in organizations confronting significant crises.

While academic literature has provided valuable insights into the factors driving antifragility of business models and investigating the essential resources to enable antifragility in organizational management, there is a notable gap in research when it comes to applying the antifragile perspective to strategic communication during crises. The few studies conducted on this topic mainly focused on investigating how the management and communication of crisis risks, or paracrises (Coombs and Holladay, 2012), can function as a training arena for crisis communication efforts, therefore fostering improvement and producing antifragility (Chen, 2023).

Recognizing the need to bridge this gap is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of how antifragility can be harnessed to enhance an organization's communication strategies in the face of adversity, going beyond the current crisis communication models based on the crisis lifecycle, which are mostly suited to address isolated events. This underscores the importance of further investigation into antifragile crisis communication strategies and their potential implications for organizational resilience and adaptability.

As we venture deeper into our exploration of antifragile crisis communication, we draw upon these foundational concepts of antifragility. We posit that antifragility offers a promising avenue for organizations to not only survive the turbulence of the new crisis environment but to flourish amidst its chaos. By understanding and applying the principles of antifragility to crisis communication, organizations can actively transform crises from mere threats into springboards for evolution, ensuring their resilience and viability in the face of ongoing uncertainty and disruption. This approach builds on the READINESS framework (Jin *et al.*, 2024) and serves as the starting point to carry out our exploration of the elements that may differentiate READINESS from antifragile perspectives.

3. Methodology

We implemented a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020), and grounded theory method to approach our conceptualization task and put forward a preliminary understanding of antifragile crisis communication. We thus analyzed the underlying processes and interactions shaped by the views of multiple actors (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). We adopted the Straussian tradition to identify the underlying factors that shape the ability of companies to leverage disruptions in the process of communication, thereby fostering antifragility (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We combined this approach with a theories-in-use perspective to take advantage of the experiences and knowledge of the participants and identify both the relevant and related constructs that reflect the role of antifragile crisis communication and its implications on an organization's viability in times of endemic and continuous crises (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020).

3.1 Sample and data collection

The data collection process for this study occurred between October 2022 and January 2023, employing a purposeful and snowball sampling technique (Johnson, 2015) to select individuals with expertise relevant to the research inquiries (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Participants were chosen based on their ability to provide comprehensive insights into their experiences and decision-making processes. Professionals from different organizations who had encountered challenges during and after the COVID-19 crisis were contacted through LinkedIn and personal contacts of the lead researchers, and they also referred other potential subjects. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, requiring interviews

to continue until limited new practical insights emerged (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). To ensure sample diversity, participants with varying lengths of work tenure were deliberately selected to capture different generational perspectives on organizational dynamics (e. g., Joshi *et al.*, 2011).

The study included 22 managers and directors from diverse sectors, such as food and beverage, industrial manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, IT services, logistics, and wellness. These sectors were selected based on participants' availability while focusing on maintaining some diversity within the sample and capturing more perspectives. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 66 years, representing medium- and large-sized firms and various functional roles like management, operations, marketing, and innovation. The companies considered operated in Italy and expanded internationally, both within and outside Europe (see Tab. 1 for detailed participant profiles).

Before data collection, a comprehensive review of existing crisis communication and antifragility literature was performed. Then, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with managers and directors to understand the factors influencing the antifragility of strategic communication activity in times of disruption and the characteristics of organizational responses to endemic crises. Interviews were conducted via videoconference by the lead researchers, lasting an average of 40 minutes and resulting in 15 hours of recorded content, while transcriptions totaled 54 pages for interviews.

The semi-structured interview guide incorporated four open-ended questions to gather information on participants' experiences and perceptions, exploring topics such as communications-related responses to crises, fostering a culture of learning, early warning systems, and factors enabling agility (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). (1) Can you describe a specific instance when your organization faced a crisis or disruption, and elaborate on the communication strategies employed to address it? What were the key factors or elements that contributed to the effectiveness of these strategies? (2) In your experience, how does your organization foster a culture of learning and adaptability in the context of crisis communication? Could you provide examples of practices or initiatives that have been particularly successful in promoting learning and adaptability during crises? (3) Are there specific early warning systems or mechanisms your organization relies on to detect and respond to potential crises or disruptions proactively? How have these systems influenced your crisis communication strategies and outcomes? (4) From your perspective, what are the primary factors that enable your organization to maintain its agility in disruptive times? How does your approach to crisis communication contribute to this agility, and can you share any instances where it has facilitated your organization's ability to adapt and thrive in turbulent times?

This approach aimed to uncover commonalities, differences, and multifaceted perspectives on antifragile crisis communication (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Glaser and Strauss, 2009).

Tab. 1: Participant profiles

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#	Job Position	Gender	Seniority (in years)	Industry
1	Export Manager	Male	15	Industrial Manufacturing
2	Sales Director	Male	18	Packaging
3	CEO	Male	25	Life Sciences and Healthcare (medical devices)
4	Sales Director	Female	12	Life Sciences and Healthcare
5	Marketing Director	Female	21	Food and Beverage
6	Branch Manager	Male	7	Banking
7	Marketing Manager	Female	5	Management Consulting
8	Digital Marketing Manager	Female	6	IT Services
9	Export Manager	Male	11	Food and Beverage
10	Import Manager	Male	12	Manufacturing
11	CEO	Male	30	Manufacturing
12	Sales Manager	Female	8	Life Sciences and Healthcare (medical devices)
13	Marketing Manager	Female	9	Wellness (fitness equipment)
14	Marketing Director	Female	22	Beauty and Cosmetics
15	Purchasing Manager	Male	12	Food and Beverage
16	Sales Director	Female	21	Food and Beverage
17	Key Account Manager	Male	14	Food and Beverage (vending machines)
18	Area Manager	Female	15	Pharmaceutical
19	Export Manager	Female	8	Wine
20	Business Developer	Male	10	Mechanicals
21	Sales and Marketing Manager	Female	6	Electronics
22	Business Developer	Female	7	Logistics

Source: Author's elaboration of primary research data

3.2 Data analysis

The collected data were subjected to analysis using a grounded theory approach in combination with a theories-in-use approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). The analysis process involved three primary steps: open-coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the development of a grounded model to establish a robust connection between empirical observations and theoretical concepts.

Two researchers participated in the coding process, frequently discussing and reporting progress to ensure consistency. During the open-coding phase, we identified various elements, events, and practices derived from participant narratives and evidence. This process involved assigning meaningful quotations to these identified categories using in-vivo coding techniques (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Similar codes were subsequently merged to encapsulate our informants' "concept-in-use".

In the next step, axial coding, we delved into the open codes to reveal the factors influencing the core phenomenon, including the diverse strategies and practices employed by companies to perform effective communication in a context of uncertainty and disruption (Strauss and Corbin, 2009).

Throughout this analytical process, we continually referenced existing theory and integrated emerging themes with prior literature (Gioia *et al.*,

2013). Categories that conceptually overlapped or complemented each other were grouped into second-order themes, representing the essential factors driving antifragile crisis communication, rooted in the concept of antifragility as an organization’s capacity to improve performance when exposed to stressors (Taleb, 2012).

For example, we employed the code “Ability to monitor audience reactions” to synthesize statements like: “We understand that the first message might not always resonate. We reiterate and refine our messaging based on real-time feedback to make sure it aligns with stakeholders’ expectations and addresses their concerns”. This code was then combined with codes like: “Adjusting messaging content and tone” and “Use of data analytics to adjust message effectiveness” to form the first-order category “Message iteration and adjustment”. In the subsequent coding step, we clustered first-order categories like: “Message iteration and adjustment” and “Channel testing” into the second-order theme “Experimentation” reflecting how organizations master the ability to simultaneously explore new opportunities and optimize existing processes in uncertain environments.

In the final phase, selective coding was applied to provide more comprehensive explanations of second-order themes and to integrate and connect them, ultimately constructing an exploratory theory of antifragile crisis communication. This iterative process continued until stable, higher-level theoretical dimensions were reached. Tab. 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the coding structure, demonstrating the outcome of this rigorous analytical approach.

Tab. 2: Coding structure

2 nd order themes (dimensions)	1 st order categories	Summary of codes (concept-in-use)
Experimentation	Message iteration and adjustment	Continuously refining and adapting crisis communication messages during a crisis. Factors include a responsive crisis communication team, the ability to monitor audience reactions in real-time, and flexibility in adjusting message content and tone. It encompasses a willingness to learn from initial message failures, swift adjustments based on feedback, and the use of data analytics to gauge message effectiveness.
	Channel testing	Exploration and evaluation of various communication channels to determine their effectiveness during a crisis. It includes the availability of multiple communication channels, the ability to analyze channel performance metrics, and the adaptability to switch between channels as needed. It involves experimenting with traditional and digital channels, conducting channel-specific audience research, and aligning channel selection with audience preferences.
	Audience feedback	Collection and analysis of feedback from stakeholders to make informed adjustments to communication strategies during a crisis. It includes the establishment of feedback mechanisms, trained personnel to interpret feedback, and the capacity to promptly act on feedback. It encompasses active listening, empathy toward audience concerns, two-way communication channels, and the incorporation of audience suggestions into messaging.
	Testing & learning from failures	Documenting and learning from communication strategies that did not yield the desired outcomes during a crisis. It includes a culture that encourages openness about failures, the documentation of unsuccessful approaches, and the ability to extract valuable lessons from these failures. It encompasses post-crisis debriefing sessions, root cause analysis, and the application of lessons learned to future crisis communication plans.

	Innovative tactics	Introduction of innovative and unconventional communication tactics to respond to crisis situations. It includes a culture that fosters creative thinking, the availability of creative professionals, and the willingness to experiment with novel approaches. It involves the use of storytelling, visual communication, gamification, and real-time interactive elements in crisis messaging. It also entails the integration of emerging technologies for unique communication strategies.
Option Generation	Message variety	Generating a range of crisis communication messages to address different aspects of a crisis. Factors include the development of diverse message templates, scenario-specific messaging, and the inclusion of empathetic and reassuring tones. It encompasses proactive message creation, alignment with various crisis scenarios, tailoring messages to specific audience segments, and consistent messaging across channels.
	Response scenarios	Creation of predefined response scenarios and communication plans for various crisis situations. It includes scenario identification, planning for different severity levels, and the establishment of clear roles and responsibilities. It also involves scenario rehearsals, scenario-specific messaging, and the ability to adapt response plans to evolving crisis dynamics.
	Dynamic resource allocation	Determining the allocation of resources, including personnel and materials, to execute different communication options during a crisis. It includes resource planning, resource availability, and resource scalability. It involves the ability to allocate resources dynamically based on the severity and scope of the crisis, prioritizing critical communication needs, and ensuring resource redundancy.
Stress	Crisis leadership	Examining the role of leadership in managing stress and providing guidance during a crisis. It includes leadership training in crisis management, strong leadership presence, and effective decision-making under pressure. It also encompasses clear communication from leaders, the ability to inspire confidence in teams, quick decision-making, and adaptability in response to evolving crisis situations.
	Emotional resilience	The ability of individuals to manage and respond to the emotional challenges that arise during a crisis. It includes self-awareness, emotional regulation techniques, and support networks. It also involves maintaining composure, empathy toward affected individuals, seeking emotional support when needed, and practicing self-care to manage stress.
	Stress testing	Subjecting crisis communication strategies and systems to rigorous testing scenarios to assess their resilience under extreme conditions. It includes the design of challenging test scenarios, the use of unexpected variables, and the simulation of worst-case crisis scenarios. It also encompasses thorough testing procedures, realistic crisis simulations, and the evaluation of system responses and performance metrics under stress. Stress testing helps organizations identify weaknesses, enhance preparedness, and build antifragility in their crisis communication plans by exposing vulnerabilities and enhancing adaptability under pressure.
	Crisis communication training	Preparation of communication professionals to handle the stress associated with crisis communication. It includes comprehensive crisis communication training programs, realistic crisis simulations, and continuous skill development. It also involves role-specific training, scenario-based exercises, certification in crisis communication, and ongoing learning to stay updated with best practices.
Redundancy	Backup communication channels	Identification and preparation of alternative communication methods to ensure information dissemination during a crisis. It includes redundancy planning, technology backup, and communication channel diversity. It also encompasses the availability of backup platforms, regular testing of secondary channels, and clear protocols for switching between primary and backup methods.
	Spokesperson redundancy	Having multiple spokespersons available to address a crisis, reducing reliance on a single individual. It includes spokesperson training, spokesperson availability, and the ability to maintain consistent messaging across spokespersons. It also involves the designation of backup spokespersons, media training for key individuals, and having a communication hierarchy in place.

**Martina Frizzo
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Antifragile crisis communication: an exploratory study

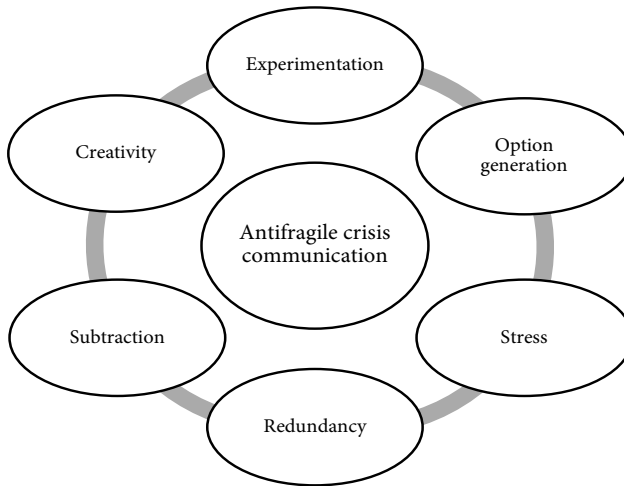
	Data backup	Ensuring the redundancy of critical data and information needed for effective crisis communication. It includes data backup systems, secure storage, and data recovery plans. It also encompasses regular data backups, encryption measures, and the ability to retrieve and utilize data swiftly during a crisis.
Subtraction	Simplification of messages	Simplifying complex crisis messages to make them easily understandable to a wide audience. It includes message clarity, removal of jargon, and prioritizing key information. It also encompasses the use of plain language, visual aids, and concise messaging to ensure clarity and accessibility.
	Focus on key information	Highlighting and prioritizing key information in crisis messages to ensure it stands out. It includes information hierarchy, message structure, and visual cues. It also encompasses the use of headlines, bullet points, and infographics to draw attention to crucial details and actions.
	Elimination of non-essentials	Removing non-essential information, jargon, and unnecessary details from crisis communication to maintain clarity. It includes message editing, content prioritization, and relevance assessment. It also involves focusing on the core message, avoiding information overload, and ensuring that critical information is prominently featured.
	Accessibility	Ensuring that crisis communication is accessible to individuals with diverse backgrounds and needs. It includes accessibility standards, multiple communication formats, and inclusive design. It also involves providing information in multiple languages, considering the needs of individuals with disabilities, and offering alternative formats, such as audio and Braille.
Creativity	Creative message design	Innovative aspects of crafting crisis communication messages. It includes the use of visual elements, storytelling techniques, and emotional resonance. It also encompasses the use of visuals, storytelling narratives, and emotionally resonant content to engage and effectively convey key crisis messages.
	Innovative communication tactics	Application of novel strategies in crisis communication. It includes the adoption of emerging technologies, interactive experiences, and unconventional methods. It also involves leveraging emerging tech, creating interactive experiences, and using unconventional approaches to capture and maintain audience attention during crises.
	Cross-functional communication	Interdisciplinary teamwork in fostering creativity during crisis communication. It encompasses interdisciplinary teams, brainstorming sessions, and diverse perspectives. It also involves collaborative ideation, leveraging insights from various departments, and integrating diverse viewpoints to develop innovative crisis responses.

Source: Author's elaboration of primary research data

4. Results and discussion

In this section, we present the results of our study. The in-depth interviews carried out highlighted the role of six important factors that have an impact in enabling antifragile crisis communication. These factors are (1) experimentation, (2) option generation, (3) stress, (4) redundancy, (5) subtraction, and (6) creativity, and they partly overlap with those presented in the READINESS framework (Fig. 1). Each theme represents a crucial aspect of antifragile crisis communication, shedding light on the multifaceted strategies and practices organizations employ to thrive in times of uncertainty and disruption. To present our findings, we have included interview quotes from the managers and directors who participated in our study.

Fig. 1: A conceptualization of antifragile crisis communication



Source: Author's elaboration of primary research data

3.1 Experimentation

Our interviews revealed that organizations embracing antifragility in crisis communication engage in continuous message iteration and implement continuous adaption of messaging strategies according to real-time feedback collected directly with the aid of technological tools such as artificial intelligence.

“We understand that the first message might not always resonate. We iterate and refine our messaging based on real-time feedback to ensure it aligns with stakeholder expectations and concerns”. (6)

Antifragile organizations also experiment with communication channels and try different combinations of them in order to understand what ensures enhanced performance.

“We test various channels to reach our stakeholders. If one channel becomes compromised during a crisis, we have alternatives ready”. (17)

In all these cases, audience feedback remains a central focus of these organizations as the foundation of their experimentation activity.

“We actively seek feedback from our audiences, we use a mix of tools like artificial intelligence and personal relationships with clients. This helps us adapt our messages to address their needs and concerns, depending on how they change”. (12)

Antifragility involves learning from failures, and, when it comes to crisis communication, “test and learn” mechanisms with quick reaction times become pivotal.

“When a crisis response doesn’t work as expected, we don’t see it as a setback but as an opportunity to learn and improve. We just make sure we are quick at fixing it and trying something new”. (21)

Antifragile organizations employ and experiment with innovative communication tactics, often supported through the use of technology. These include storytelling, visual communication, and gamification.

“We really try to think outside the box. Traditional ways of handling difficult communication do not work anymore, especially when Gen Z is the target. We do not even think in terms of crises, because with social media you can have a different issue every day and you never know whether it will stick or be gone the next day. So, we just try to capture attention every day and convey our message effectively, like using technology and visual aids to generate awareness and emotions”. (3)

3.2 Option generation

Antifragile crisis communication involves option generation with a mixture of options that are planned with the aid of scenario forecasting, and emergent options that are generated while the disruptive situations evolve.

“Having a variety of messages prepared for different scenarios is crucial. This flexibility allows us to adapt quickly to the specific context of each situation, but we also know that we need to be always aware of unpredictable changes and be ready to change our approach into something we had never thought of”. (3)

Moreover, we found that the development of different response scenarios is a fundamental capability to test the ability to generate options of response and to support the agility of the organization by stimulating lateral thinking.

“We simulate scenarios. This helps us anticipate challenges and formulate response strategies in advance, but it also keeps our minds active and ready to face something completely unpredictable”. (9)

Dynamic resource allocation is another important pillar of antifragile crisis communication, and it involves the ability to quickly reorganize and reallocate resources, including personnel and intangibles, to execute different communication options during a crisis, prioritizing critical communication needs and ensuring resource redundancy.

“Resource allocation must align with the evolving needs of the situation. We try to ensure that we optimize our resources continuously by monitoring the environment internally and externally”. (1)

3.3 Stress

The stress factor includes both stress management and strategic stress exposure or testing. When it comes to stress management, effective crisis leadership is paramount.

“Leadership is probably the most important factor when the situation gets critical. Organizations need someone to guide it and give direction through the uncertainty and the ups and downs. If this is missing, it is very evident, it doesn’t look good, and the company cannot communicate as a united front”. (14)

Another important factor for antifragility in this domain is the emotional resilience of those who are part of the organization, since the high pressure of disruptions and the uncertainty related to the future of the organization can cause anxiety and cloud judgement and decision-making.

“Employees and teams must be emotionally prepared and trained to handle the stress associated with these issues”. (12)

On the other hand, our study’s results reveal that the deliberate exposure to appropriate amounts of stress can be beneficial to foster improvement and refine strategic capabilities, such as working with limited resources or knowledge.

“By deliberately generating tension and friction within our communication system, we were able to train our teams to respond effectively under high-pressure situations, so that we are used to complex situations”. (19)

Stress testing also involves gradually increasing the stress levels of crisis communication exercises to ensure improvement over time and leveraging technology to appropriately measure the proportionality of the induced stress, so that it can challenge the system without breaking it.

Ongoing crisis communication training contributes to increasing the ability of organizations to work under stress as part of their daily routine.

“Training is ongoing. Our teams need to be used to unexpected things happening, even if it sounds like a paradox”. (5)

3.4 Redundancy

Antifragile communication requires redundant communication resources and capabilities, such as establishing backup communication channels, since the organization may suddenly be prevented from using specific channels, for example in the case their access has been violated. Although redundant resources may seem like an unnecessary expense in stable times, they end up paying off in the context of continuous disruptions.

“We have redundancy built into our communication systems to ensure uninterrupted information flow”. (8)

However, redundancy is also related to tangible, intangible, and human resources, as well as capabilities, since disruptions can affect entire geographical areas, departments, and digitally-stored data, determining the need for people other than the designated spokesperson to engage in communication with different stakeholders.

“Having multiple spokespersons ready is crucial. It prevents a single point of failure in communication”. (11)

“Data is secured with backups so that in case of data loss, we can recover essential information quickly”. (22)

“Logistical redundancy is also important, and it goes beyond communication because it ensures our operations can continue, even in the face of disruptions”. (22)

3.5 Subtraction

Although subtraction may seem like a contradictory factor when related to redundancy, these two factors address different aspects of antifragility. Antifragile communication in times of disruption involves simplifying messages and providing only necessary and transparent communication by focusing on key messages to avoid internal and external confusion.

“As a rule, with our communication we only provide essential information clearly, and we try to avoid unnecessary complexity”. (16)

“Clarity is vital, and we prioritize key information to prevent information overload during crises, because it can easily backlash”. (8)

The elimination of non-essentials refers both to messages and to communication processes, such as inflexible approval processes, strict procedures, bureaucracy, and hierarchies.

“Non-essential information is eliminated, our messages are concise and directly address the issue. Also, we keep procedures as lean as possible because time and agility are essential when you are facing a difficult situation that requires you to act quickly. Of course, this requires trust and empowerment of everyone in the company”. (8)

Accessibility is another crucial aspect of communication in times of crisis, since dialogue is only possible if all parties involved can access the conversation and the information provided.

“Information accessibility is crucial. Organizations tend to speak a lot, but they often fail to consider whether anyone is listening, whether their

messages are actually going across and understood. We always make sure that our stakeholders can easily access the information they need and that they know where to look for it. This can only be possible if you built a strong relationship with your audiences and you do not make too much noise constantly". (13)

3.6 Creativity

Creativity in communication and message design can be seen as an unnecessary waste of time when the priority is the protection of the organization. However, antifragile crisis communication involves the ability to employ creativity under any circumstance, which is also part of a culture of experimentation.

"We use innovative visuals and storytelling techniques to make our messages memorable, because we are often fighting to be heard over many other voices, including journalists on traditional media and anyone talking on social networks who has the potential to go viral". (4)

Innovative communication tactics, therefore, become an important aspect of being heard and of pushing people to listen and trust the organization in times of crisis. One way to achieve creativity in crisis communication is that of involving different people in the discussion instead of isolating the responsibility to the crisis management team.

"Different teams and people from all departments come together to brainstorm ideas. In situations like this, you never know who can have a brilliant idea, maybe because they have seen something similar in their previous experience and learned something from it". (19)

The results of our study emphasize critical factors that align with the evolving landscape of management literature, highlighting the imperative need for organizations to embrace antifragility in the face of ongoing disruptions (Taleb, 2012). Antifragility, within the scope of crisis communication, represents a departure from conventional notions of resilience and robustness (Capano and Woo, 2017; Hillmann and Guenther 2021; Munoz *et al.*, 2021; Frandsen and Johansen, 2016; Hamann *et al.*, 2012), and requires a partial reconsideration of the more recent concept of READINESS (Jin *et al.*, 2024) that it builds on. It embraces the idea of leveraging disruptions for growth and improvement of crisis communication capabilities and of the organization as a whole. Within the discipline of crisis communication, our findings illustrate what factors contribute to the ability of organizations to apply the antifragility principles to enhance their strategies and move beyond attempts to combat uncertainty and disorder.

One of the key findings of our study is the significance of experimentation. This aligns with the traditional antifragility concept (Taleb, 2012), as it encourages organizations to actively test and adapt their crisis communication strategies. This idea resonates with the literature on

flexibility and continuous improvement (Fiksel *et al.*, 2015; Branicki *et al.*, 2018). By experimenting with different approaches and learning from failures, organizations can become more adaptable and resilient in the face of uncertainty.

Another critical factor we identified is option generation, which aligns not only with the abovementioned flexibility (Fiksel *et al.*, 2015; Branicki *et al.*, 2018; Gotham and Campanella, 2011) but also with the need for innovative strategies in complex environments (Bianchi *et al.*, 2017; Troise *et al.*, 2022) and with the READINESS framework. By generating a range of response scenarios, organizations can better navigate the chaotic nature of crises and make informed decisions.

Stress emerged as a crucial factor, underscoring the importance of managing stress during crises, but also to strategically and deliberately expose organizations to controlled amounts of stress to foster improvement and increase their ability to function in complex environments. This connects with the literature on the role of leadership (Jin *et al.*, 2024), emotional resilience, and mental adaptability in crisis management (Frare and Beuren, 2021), highlighting that leaders who can remain composed under pressure and support their teams effectively contribute to an organization's antifragility. On the other hand, scholars have highlighted the connection of antifragility with the ability to thrive and benefit from stressors (Taleb, 2012; Ramezani and Camarinha-Matos, 2020).

Redundancy, another factor revealed in our findings, emphasizes the need for backup systems and resources. This aligns with the concept of redundancy, a common feature in antifragile systems (Taleb, 2012; Chen, 2023), which ensures that an organization can continue its operations in the face of disruptions and reallocate resources and responsibilities without losing functionality. This appears as an element that transcends the READINESS framework, as does the element of subtraction.

The concept of subtraction emerged in our findings, suggesting that organizations should eliminate non-essential elements from their crisis communication strategies. This mirrors the importance of lean structures and simple procedures (Gotham and Campanella, 2011), which are crucial for effectiveness and speed in crisis messaging.

Finally, creativity was identified as a critical factor in antifragile crisis communication. This resonates with the need for innovative approaches in complex and uncertain environments (Bianchi *et al.*, 2017; Troise *et al.*, 2022), since creative message design and innovative communication tactics can help organizations stand out and adapt swiftly during crises.

In summary, our findings underscore the relevance of specific factors that can be applied by organizations to their crisis communication plan in order to enhance the antifragility of crisis management efforts. These factors can be related to the traditional concept of antifragility (Taleb, 2012) as described in management literature. Our study highlights the importance of experimentation, option generation, stress, redundancy, subtraction, and creativity in building antifragile crisis communication and management plans to protect organizations beyond isolated disruptions, by changing from a mindset that aims to fight uncertainty to one that can flourish in it. By integrating these elements into their crisis communication

plans, organizations can better navigate the challenges posed by continuous disruptions in today's dynamic business environment.

Our study also facilitates the integration of the READINESS framework by relying on its underlying assumptions and some of its core elements, while shifting the ultimate purpose to optimize the benefits of embracing antifragility.

4. Conclusions

In the discipline of crisis communication, our findings offer practical insights that organizations can apply to enhance their performance in chaotic times. These implications highlight the significance of multifaceted strategies and the transformative potential of antifragile crisis communication.

Organizations should recognize that effective crisis communication involves a combination of strategies. It is not merely about damage control or prevention but also about proactively leveraging crises as opportunities for growth and improvement (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020). This shift in perspective aligns with Nassim Nicholas Taleb's concept of antifragility, emphasizing continuous learning and adaptation.

To implement these strategies effectively, managers should encourage a culture of agility and adaptability within their teams (Fiksel *et al.*, 2015; Branicki *et al.*, 2018; Gotham and Campanella, 2011). This means investing in training and resources to equip communication professionals with the skills needed to experiment, generate options, manage and leverage stress, employ redundancy, simplify messaging and procedures, and infuse creativity into their crisis responses.

Moreover, crises should no longer be viewed solely as threats. Instead, they can be catalysts for positive change. Organizations must foster a mindset that values learning from crises, allowing these experiences to drive improvements in communication strategies.

A key takeaway is the importance of adaptability and flexibility (Fiksel *et al.*, 2015). Managers should ensure that their communication teams can swiftly adjust their strategies in response to evolving crisis scenarios. This may involve the development of agile communication protocols and the incorporation of technology-driven tools for rapid response.

Furthermore, managers should empower their teams to make critical decisions at the frontline, reducing bureaucratic delays that can hinder an effective crisis response. This empowerment can be facilitated through training and the establishment of clear decision-making frameworks (Barton, 2020).

Organizations should prioritize clear and honest communication during crises, acknowledging shortcomings and demonstrating a commitment to rectifying issues. These efforts can serve as valuable assets during crisis recovery and long-term reputation management (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007).

Our study enriches the theoretical landscape by extending the concept of antifragility to the field of crisis communication. This expansion broadens the understanding of antifragility beyond its original domains,

demonstrating its relevance in enhancing organizational performance in the face of adversity, fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Taleb, 2012).

Traditional crisis communication models have often centered on prevention, damage control, and restoration. However, our study highlights the need to integrate antifragility principles into existing crisis communication frameworks (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994; Richardson, 1994; Coombs, 2015). This integration contributes to the theoretical foundation of crisis communication by introducing a more proactive and growth-oriented approach.

Our findings underscore the interdisciplinary nature of effective crisis communication. Aspects such as creativity, stress management, and option generation draw from diverse fields like psychology, innovation management, and leadership studies. This interdisciplinarity suggests that theoretical frameworks for crisis communication should be comprehensive and flexible to address the complexities of antifragile crisis communication.

Looking ahead, our study opens doors for future research in the domain of antifragile communication. Researchers can delve deeper into specific areas, such as investigating the impact of antifragility on stakeholder perceptions or developing measurement tools to assess the degree of antifragility in an organization's communication strategies.

In conclusion, our study not only provides practical guidance for organizations seeking to enhance their crisis communication but also contributes to the theoretical understanding of antifragility in the context of crisis management. Embracing antifragile principles empowers organizations to not only survive but thrive amidst uncertainty, ultimately contributing to their long-term sustainability and success.

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Antifragile crisis
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Brand activism in search for ethical communication leadership: Vivienne Westwood and the clashes between person and brand

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Abstract

Frame of the research: *This paper builds on the recent, fast-growing body of literature on brand activism to explore how brand leaders construct themselves as activists in contemporary society and the challenges they face inherent to their roles.*

Purpose of the paper: *The aim of our paper is to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in the current scenario of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms.*

Methodology: *We developed an in-depth critical case centered on Vivienne Westwood as person, leader, and brand. We adopted a netnographic research design that combined a diachronic, retrospective, and auto-biographical reconstruction of Vivienne Westwood's life story, with non-participant observation of online posts, conversations, and comments centered on Westwood as person and as brand, shared on social media platforms.*

Results: *Our study highlights a series of clashes that arise when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use engaging, and fine-tuning communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging, and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to her changing moods, needs, and desires.*

Practical implications: *This paper highlights the challenges of being an activist leader and brand in contemporary woke society. In so doing, it provides strategic guidelines on how communication should be conceived in the company to achieve ethical leadership and overcome cultural tensions.*

Originality of the paper: *This paper contributes to advance brand and CEO activism as well as strategic communication theoretical debate, through explicitly linking the tensions and the clashes between authentic purpose and commodified market logics emerging in social media platforms to a lack of exercise of ethical communication leadership on the part of the brand leader.*

Key words: *brand activism; CEO activism; strategic communication; leadership of meanings; ethical leadership*

1. Introduction

In our geo-politically divided times, everyone feels entitled to have and share an opinion. Now, not only companies and brands are expected to

publicly state where they stand on a controversial issue; also, corporate leaders and CEOs (Chief Executive Officer) are expected to express their opinions on societal matters and to take a public stance on those issues that are felt as cogent by society. When Disney CEO Bob Chapek was initially reluctant to publicly condemn Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, his silence prompted Disney employees to walk out in protest¹. This legislation prohibited classroom instruction and discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity in certain elementary school grades. Although initially silent, Disney joined the debate at the urging of its employees, and Chapek made several remarks criticizing the bill². In response to Disney's denunciation of the education legislation, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida began to mock the company as "Woke Disney" and his supporters started to accuse Disney of adopting stances that conservatives said went too far, such as changes to its theme parks and streaming services in terms of retheming some symbols, visuals, and representations of gender and ethnicity (i.e., removing a scene depicting pirates selling women in an auction in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride to make it more inclusive and fair).

The dispute between Disney and Florida lawmakers is indicative of the increasing pressure corporations face to be involved in partisan battles. If leaders stay silent, their companies and brands are likely to face blowbacks. However, when leaders expose themselves they enter bipartisan controversies that can easily escalate in our testing and delicate geo-political times.

How can brand leaders navigate the tensions and the controversies that arise from being activists? What is the role of strategic communication in supporting leaders to face such delicate matters? In this paper, we build on the recent and fast-growing body of literature on brand activism (Sarkar, 2018; Eyada, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2021; Sibai *et al.*, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Andersen and Johansen, 2023; Cammarota *et al.*, 2023; Gambetti and Biraghi 2023; Verlegh, 2024; Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Westwood and Kelly, 2014) to explore how brand leaders construct themselves as activists and how their engagement with bipartisan issues can generate controversies that are inherent in the mandate that contemporary leaders are taking on to deliver growth and profitability for their companies and brands in tandem with social value for their stakeholders.

To reply to our questions, we conducted an in-depth critical case centered on Vivienne Westwood as person, leader, and brand, to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in contemporary society of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms as the result of a lack of ethical communication leadership.

Our study highlights a series of clashes and mismatches that are inherent to brand leaders' commitment to be an activist and actively involved in shaping, supporting, and fighting for societal priorities. Those clashes arise

¹ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/darden-school-of-business/take-a-stand-or-sit-one-out-ceo-activism-and-partisan-consumer-behavior/81381/1>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/article/disney-florida-desantis.html>

when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging, and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to their changing moods, needs, and desires.

In terms of our contribution, we advance the debate on brand activism by critically unpacking the role that leaders have in framing meanings though their actions and statements and the controversies to which them and their brands might be exposed in the dialogic arena of the sociotechnical platforms, in which brand leaders' commitments are subject to consumers' scrutiny. The critical case that we develop in this paper contributes also to advance the debate on the role of strategic communication by highlighting how communication can play a vital role as the conscience of the organization and the brand when activism and engagement with bipartisan causes or ethical matters are at quest.

Our study is organized as follows. First, we present brand activism as a contest territory that can position a brand at the hearth of social and geopolitical tensions and polarizations, which force brand leaders to be more exposed as they are expected to act as the public face of their companies and brands' commitments. Then, we present the results of our critical case, in which we highlight the discrepancies between Vivienne Westwood pol-ethical leadership, the positioning of her brand, the construction of her fashion empire, and the consumers' counter culture that harshly refused and rejected Westwood's communication messages as a committed brand leader.

2. Navigating controversies in brand activism

Brand activism has emerged over the last few years as one of the most prominent and fast-growing debates in the branding literature (i.e., Sarkar, 2018; Eyada, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Key *et al.*, 2021; Sibai *et al.*, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Andersen and Johansen, 2023; Cammarota, *et al.*, 2023; Gambetti and Biraghi 2023; Verlegh, 2024, Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Pimentel *et al.*, 2024).

Brand activism has been defined as a brand effort that aims to “promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society” (Sarkar, 2018, p. 554). This is done through an act whereby a brand publicly takes a stand on divisive social or political issues (ibi). This is exemplified in Westwood's 2020 article of *The New York Times*, where she openly acknowledged her brand's commitment to reducing consumerism and challenging an economic system that prioritizes profit over environmental health. This issue has historically tackled both an economic and political divide, sparking contentious debates and dividing factions over the years.

The contentious nature of brand activism differentiates it from corporate social responsibility or cause-related marketing (Chernev and Blair, 2015; Luo and Bhattacharya, 2009), which typically deal with generally-accepted, non-divisive, pro-social issues such as supporting access to healthcare and education or fighting natural disasters (Muckerjee and Althuisen, 2020).

In a recent study, Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) found that activism positions the brand at the hearth of the contestations and polarizations that are the result of the unresolved inner tension of the brand being both a cultural and a market player. Activist brand can alienate a significant part of their existing market whose positions contrast those taken by the brand (Key *et al.*, 2021; Westwood, 2020).

In analyzing Freeda Media's recipe of brand activism, the authors unmask a spiral of mismatches between the brand conduct and consumer perceptions that erodes the credibility of brand purpose, creating the conditions for consumers' critique. Among those mismatches, the brand suffered a misalignment between the ideological and socio-political background of its leaders, whose past commitments collide with the brand purpose. The founders and leading managers of Freeda Media were former executives working in Silvio Berlusconi's media empire, well-known and criticized for its cultural responsibility in objectifying the role of women in media representations and narratives. That marks a direct clash with the Freeda Media's brand project whose purpose is to genuinely support women valorization and gender equality.

Literature on brand activism underlines that commitment to be an activist brand requires to pursue activism as a business strategy (Pimentel *et al.*, 2024) and not just as a marketing ploy (Sarkar, 2018). Companies like Patagonia are born with a political mission also due to the imprinting of their leaders (Boeker 1989). "Yvon Chouinard's founding mission at Patagonia to "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis" has influenced the company's intense political advocacy around public lands and environmental practices, even using its marketing prowess to influence the election of pro-environment candidates through its "Vote Our Planet program" (Moorman, 2020, p. 391). The political mission that lies at the hearth of the brand purpose and inspires the business strategy stems from the engagement of brand leaders as activists. Brand activism then raise higher pressure and demands on leadership, as brand leaders are now expected to shoulder societal responsibilities and be the public face of their companies and brands' commitments.

2.1 Brand leaders as the new face of brand activism

The claim for or against a specific societal priority or cause is often declared directly by the brand leading figures, like the CEO (Bedendo and Siming, 2021; Burbano, 2021; Chatterji and Toffel, 2018, 2019; Coombs and Holladay, 2018; Melloni *et al.*, 2024). Brand leaders and CEOs are perceived as the face of the company and usually receive the highest publicity (Fetscherin, 2015). Therefore, silence is not a viable option for leaders anymore (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2022). The founders and CEOs can act on behalf of the brand and make activist statements inspired by their own personal values (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021). Leaders' opinions and statements have a significant impact on financial aspects such as financial performance, profits, and stock returns, as well as on non-financial aspects such as job application and retention of employees, trust, and the company's overall reputation (Fetscherin, 2015).

Due to the increasing role that leaders play in ensuring their companies and brand success, over the last few years, CEO activism has been on the rise (Chatterji and Toffel, 2015), and scholars (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) have started to explore the impact and the influence that brand leaders and CEOs who speak out have in shaping policies thanks to the visibility of their corporations and their publicly declared involvement.

Up to now, this recent form of activism is getting increasing media attention and public relations firms are now building new consulting practices around it (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018). Also, thanks to the visibility that brand leaders' statements have on social media, their personal commitment to activism is quickly becoming a strategic lever in corporate branding and corporate communication (Vitulli *et al.*, 2024).

As we have entered in a new age of CEO activism (Sarkar, 2018), more studies are needed that investigate in-depth how and why corporate leaders are deciding to shoulder activists' responsibilities. Taking a stance, brand leaders and CEOs are showing their ability and sensitivity to recognize the moral content of situations and to pursue their moral beliefs in all those situations as stakeholders are judging brands also based on their competence to act as true activists (Sibai *et al.*, 2021).

So far, the debate on CEO activism has offered prescriptive guidelines on how to strategically manage communication messages and storytelling to maximize impact and perceived authenticity of activist brands' claims (Key *et al.*, 2021; Dowell and Jackson, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Appels, 2022) and the outcome of brand activism (Villagra *et al.*, 2021; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Hou and Poliquin, 2023). Most of these studies have analyzed the drivers that push brand leaders toward activism (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) and the stakeholder responses to activist stances (Chatterji and Toffel, 2019). While these studies have explored the alignment between CEOs' commitments and stakeholders' expectations and reactions (Rim *et al.*, 2020; Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Afego and Alagidede, 2022), studies are missing that have undertaken a more comprehensive and critical examination of the broader aspects of value alignment in the context of brand leaders' activism.

This gap is particularly urgent to be filled in face of the call raised by the special issue on "The Strategic Role of Communication in Management", whose intent is to stimulate scholars to reflect on how communication can support corporate leaders in managing business processes (Falkheimer, 2014). Considering that the CEO and corporate leaders personify and signal where a brand stands in terms of value and moral engagements, their credibility and the credibility of their communication cannot be taken for granted (Melloni *et al.*, 2024). Especially when leaders take actions that appear inconsistent with their stated ideals and/or intents (Melloni *et al.*, 2024).

This is typical of deliberate corporate strategies that in organizational and strategic management studies have been conceptualized as "decoupling", a notion that refers to the formal disengagement of a company from actions that may contradict external expectations (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). In situations where external stakeholder expectations and managerial interests

collide, companies may strategically dissociate policies from practices (*Ibi*). This translates for instance in strategically communicating a specific policy or program to stakeholders, while actual corporate conduct diverges from these formal declarations, creating an illusion of compliance with external expectations and pressures (Westphal and Zajac, 2001; MacLean and Benham, 2010; Benham and MacLean, 2011; de Bree and Stoopendaal, 2020).

Indeed, the way in which brands leaders formulate their communication messages has an impact on how commitments to activism are received by consumers and stakeholders, therefore brands must ensure there is no disconnection between what leaders strategically communicate, how the company acts, what consumers want to hear (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024), the good fit with the bipartisan issue they choose to support (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024) and the brand essence and DNA (Verlegh, 2024).

More than ever, purposeful communication retains a strategic role in advancing the corporate mission deliberately engaging in communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014). In our polarized and delicate geo-political times, corporate communication has the challenging mandate to ensure and safeguard the alignment between the brand purpose, the statements, commitments of the brand leaders, and the expectations of the stakeholders. This mandate makes communication a strategic asset that can help leaders to drive transformation and change through actions that are visible, consistent, distinctive, transparent, and authentic (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014).

In this paper, we critically delve into the clashes that arise when brand leaders become activists without being inspired by a strategic communication ethos that guides their leadership to provide guidelines on the role that strategic communication should play in supporting the brand navigate tensions and overcome clashes in times of consumer and brand socio-political activism.

3. Methodology

This study develops a critical case sampling approach (Coyne, 1997). Critical case sampling provides an information-rich context for an in-depth study based on its potential to enable significant insights or contribute substantially to theory and practice, as individuals, groups, or settings are selected that bring to the fore the phenomenon of interest” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 112; Coyne, 1997). Our critical case is constituted by the case of Vivienne Westwood, a British luxury fashion brand, whose establishment and development trajectory resonate of the ongoing tensions and contradictions embodied in Westwood as an upstream, anti-capitalist, activist person guided by a fervent desire to disrupt and change, as opposed to Westwood as entrepreneur of an elitarian, high-end fashion brand navigating the commodified market logics of contemporary capitalist society. This tension plays out against the background of a societal and political milieu where contrasting consumer

movements, consumerism, political, and environmental activism, and anti-capitalist critique coalesce, collide and are amplified in the space of social media platforms. This makes Vivienne Westwood a critical case that constitutes an ideal unit for in-depth analysis that may be generative of insights and cultural understanding of the clashes existing between person, leader, and brand in times of societal brand activism.

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Brand activism in search
for ethical communication
leadership: Vivienne
Westwood and the clashes
between person and brand

To carry out our critical case study, we developed a netnographic research design (Kozinets, 2020) that combined an in-depth, diachronic, retrospective, auto-biographical reconstruction of Vivienne Westwood's life story, with non-participant observation of online posts, conversations, comments, and reactions centered on Vivienne Westwood as person and as brand, shared on social media platforms both owned by Westwood and independently owned by consumers and opinion leaders. Table 1 presents all the sources we considered to collect and aggregate data useful for our dataset composition. Particularly, the diachronic retrospective reconstruction was based on critical analysis of news, interviews, opinion pieces, and other media archival materials related to Vivienne Westwood's lifestyle and lifestory both as a woman and as a stylist and entrepreneur. Archival data analysis was complemented by an in-depth interview that one of the authors personally conducted with the British stylist in 2018, where issues related to her view of fashion, of society, of politics and how these translated into her brand essence and vision were deepened.

The non-participant observation of online posts and conversations on social media platforms generated an investigative work that resulted in the selection, collection, assemblage, and archive of a total dataset of 240 posts, reels, stories, videos, 9362 comments, 31 media articles and 1 book (see Table 1). Moreover, this investigative phase was paralleled by an immersion phase where the authors engaged in immersive journaling operations, writing personal, reflective, emotional notes that complemented, enriched, and integrated the investigative dataset (Kozinets, 2020). In the immersive journal that counts about 4.200 words, deep data were singled out that were most revelatory of the clashes inherent in Westwood as person and Westwood as brand. Deep data that resonate of the multiple tensions between authentic purpose and market logics that mark the life trajectory of Westwood as activist and as entrepreneur.

Finally, data integration was performed through a combination of deductive and inductive coding of the collected materials as well as through the ongoing interpretation of emergent cultural insights facilitated by the immersive journals. Interpretation emerged as an interactive, iterative process aimed at generating a hermeneutic circle of understanding where each portion of the data was interpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Interpretation was enriched by triangulating our insights across the researchers to enhance the reliability of the interpretive process.

strategy as a leader and entrepreneur could not only affect the experience of Westwood's consumers but exert a much broader impact on their ideologic path as citizens and individuals, stimulating debates and controversies, so that the brand communication strategy became dependent on her fervent activism.

"The first thing you should really know about me is that I was born in the Second World War. Rationing. All of that. I didn't have a banana until I was seven. Things were scarce. And everybody was knitting [...]. I am a fashion designer and I am what is known as an activist. And I suppose there were signs of that from an early age. I have been embarrassed sometimes at telling stories that give the impression I thought I was special or some sort of goody-goody person. That isn't right"³. Vivienne Westwood was a global fashion icon, but a punk provocateur and a political activist. At her seventies, she was a Dame of the British Empire, head of a global fashion brand, and one of the most influential designers on the planet, "the Coco Chanel of our times" (according to Alexander McQueen). But at the same time, she managed her collections in absence of a real chain of command (apart from Carlo D'Amario, CEO and 'Italian godfather to Vivienne Westwood Inc.): no call sheet, no director, things related to design happening by stealth and by osmosis (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

4.1 Cultures and subcultures nurturing Vivienne Westwood pol-ethical design style

As Ian Kelly tells in the Westwood memoir he collaborated to write, clothes as an intimate and feminized territory before fashion system itself have been the compelling tool to put Westwood at the centre of a story of tumult and to make her able to tell the story of a changing Britain (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

Modern British culture was born with the Second World War: the Depression, the War, the post-war austerity, the birth of the National Health Service, the welfare state, and then the Queen, who became primary source of inspiration for the company's logo. The cultural relationship between Winston Churchill and Vivienne Westwood diverse myths has been even definitively clear during May 2000 anti-capitalist riots in London, when a punk Mohican hairstyle fashioned out of turf was placed on the head of the man who 'saved Western democracy' statue. From austerity to activism, informed eye on fabric and fashion has been, is, and probably will be for a long time, a political and social matter: Westwood started surfing DIY and 'make do and mend' cultures in her childhood and never let it go, as her company's twenty first century claim 'Buy less. Buy well and make it last' demonstrates (Zetlaoui, 2019). In the wartime and post-war years, through what they wore they were political and became uniform in the national cause, as clothes could mirror ethical values like sacrifice and practicality.

Austerity has been the first source of inspiration for Westwood cultural mantras: 'clothes for heroes, clothes that state intent', but then she evolved, also thanks to her personal and intimate political guru, her business and

³ Do It Yourself, film documentary - a year in the life of Vivienne Westwood, written by Jean-Marie Sztalryd, directed by Letmiya Sztalryd, Arte Films, 2010

romantic partner Malcolm McLaren, the impresario, musician and fashion designer, 'father' and manager of punk and new wave bands like Sex Pistols and Adam and the Ants and early commercial architect of the punk subculture. In the '70s, McLaren gave her the opportunity to have her first touchpoints with fashion (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

The second cultural root to nurture Westwood's activist plant and her fashion design creativity has been music: rock, the revolutionary new music of late 50's, but also the powerful new youth culture. This culture became a look, made of brothel creepers, slicked-back hair for boys and new silhouette and attitude for girls. It was the birth of Teddy Boys dress scene, a look known first as working-class incarnation and then as a threat to society, associated to teenage violence. 'Let It Rock', born in 1971, was McLaren's store in West London, where Westwood customized and repaired original clothing (in 1973, the shop was given a new name, 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die', to reflect a range of clothing from Britain's early '60s 'rocker' fashions). Her first creations were a mix of the Teddy Boys suits and the American uniform of teenage rebellion inspired by T-shirts, leathers and jeans of Marlon Brando and James Dean. As costume historian Colin Woodhead said, "The idea of fashionable clothes as a threat to society was born".

McLaren was also able to inject Westwood's style with the philosophical inspiration of the avant-garde political revolutionary group rejecting capitalist authority and using interventions to subvert and challenge the bourgeois status quo (Debord, 1967): t-shirts with disturbing slogans such as 'Destroy' superimposed over a swastika and an image of the Queen or a pair of homosexual cowboys naked from the waist down found youth favor in an era of ethnic tension, jaded establishment, industrial, and military unrest (Savage, 1991). Half a century later, Westwood activist slogans kept the same inspirational guideline: "Every demonstration is a fight against capitalism, against the government and against austerity. Capitalism is the enemy of the bees, capitalism is the enemy of human rights. Everything is connected" (Westwood and Kelly, 2014).

The Westwood-McLaren merchandise has been the fundamental matrix for punk style. Sex was the focus for rebellion. In 1975, the Westwood's store changed its name in "Sex": walls covered with porno graffiti, selling fetishist clothes. For women, it was the first aggressive approach to fashion in post-war culture and a corresponding emancipation of subcultural style, as punk girls engaged in the activity of confusing sexual messages: they looked like prostitutes but were not and this became an exercise of power (Evans and Thornton, 1991).

But if wartime and post-war DIY, '50 rock and its '70 revival, agit-prop situationism and punk style as endorsement to social construction of female power and sex liberation have been the cultural signifiers for Vivienne Westwood till the end of the '70, when she and McLaren broke, she found a more creative source than something to fight against: tradition. For Westwood, now alone in her success path, fashion was the reinvention and renewal of tradition: "I'm not trying to do something different, I'm trying to do the same thing but in a different way" (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

4.2 *The birth of the luxury brand: pol-ethics vs. profit*

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Brand activism in search
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In 1976 till 1980 Westwood's store was re-named 'Seditionaires - Clothes for Heroes'. A living rat in a cage on the main desk of the store and a collection including pin-up clothes, chains, leather jackets, fetishist belts was the stylist's way of opposing old generations, as she declared, but also to find a design language that could have been 'inside' fashion borders, looking for a collection that could evolve from boycotting market and society to pro-cotting a style and collection series.

In 1981, the store became 'World's End': walls were decorated as a pirate galleon, clothes reminded of some outlaws, dandies and buccaneers and they were all unisex. In 1982 Westwood designed the Savage collection, inspired by native Americans and she opened her second store, 'Nostalgia of Mud'. Westwood became the most appreciated stylist by musicians and bands such as Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet, who wore her mini-crinoline (typical English textiles such as tweed) and platform shoes, which are still her most famous and typical trademarks. In 1986 Westwood's mini-crini (a '60 style mini-skirt in hooped nineteenth-century Empire crinoline, mythology of restriction juxtaposed with liberation) definitely become fashion design for fashion market.

Westwood became one of the greatest designers and the figurehead of a company, named after herself, Vivienne Westwood, (Waston, 2019) and co-founded with Carlo D'Amario. Back then, D'Amario was coming from a leading position in Fiorucci and Elio Fiorucci himself was the first one to help D'Amario and Westwood in the production of their first official collections as a company. D'Amario's goal as a CEO was since the very beginning to preserve both Westwood-person's authenticity and creativity and, more in the backstage, to ensure corporate competitiveness and aggressiveness in the global fashion market.

Selling clothes and products in more than 50 countries, with more than 400 employees, four different clothing lines - Gold Label, Red Label, Men and Anglomania - and over 700 points of sale worldwide across all five continents (Clarke and Holt, 2016), boycotting tradition was too generic for Westwood's ethical leadership, and at the same time too British-based. So, for her and Andreas Kronthaler, her last husband, with whom since 1992 she created and revised every single collection detail⁴, another theme became even more central: sustainability and the dedication for humanity and the environment. This commitment marked the very birth of a contradiction between Vivienne Westwood the person and the brand. Approximately 15 years before her demise, Westwood discovered James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which outlooks the biosphere as a living being and all its inhabitants as organs of Mother Earth. From this time, she constantly worked for the improvement of the condition of our planet and valued human rights. She tried to raise the awareness for this topic through her own website "climaterévolution" (Zetlaoui, 2019), calling for a wiser consumption (Clarke and Holt, 2016). This call continued in her fashion brand: the production of the collections has been scaled down with the aim to convince her consumers to buy quality rather than quantity.

⁴ De Tommasi A. (2019), "Vivienne Westwood", vanityfair.it

In 2015 Westwood relaunched the ethical fashion initiative “Handmade with Love” bags: the people privately supplied the fashion brand with a range of high-end accessories produced in Nairobi, Kenya, and the collaboration gave back to the communities where the inspiration was taken from, especially through its new sustainable wealth creation approach (Veridiano, 2018). This attempt had the goal of empowering women artisans, entrepreneurship, and financial independence and for the Kenyans it meant the ability to grow a new industry and pass on skills to the next generation to promote long-term wealth for families and the entire economy.

Over time, till her death, Vivienne Westwood’s engagement in sustainable values as a leader deepened up to the point where she was well-known for her punk and historically inspired collections as well as for her ecological violence. But, if this was her facet as an ethical activist, what about the brand leader?

As Vivienne Westwood brand has been always privately owned, one of the freedoms of Westwood’s person has been to follow her own will and do not distress about shareholders and the size of their dividends. Westwood brand suffered a misalignment between the ideological and socio-political background of its leader, whose commitment collided with the brand purpose. In 2010 after presenting her collection during London Fashion Week, Westwood made a stand against consumerist society declaring to reports: “Stop all this consumerism. I just tell people, stop buying clothes. Why not protect this gift of life while we have it?” (Katz, 2010). With her growing insistence that consumers should resist consumerism, the tension within the company increased (Clarke and Holt, 2016). Were Westwood the person and the brand following the same principles? Communicating the same core messages through commitments and actions? The Westwood brand official website with its online selling system with a dedicated team of 50 employees driving 45% of the turnover from the e-commerce shows that the person/brand ideologies remain the same: quality versus quantity; Gaia, arts and culture; climate change and human rights. Nevertheless, Vivienne Westwood has always been a fashion brand like any other, pushing consumers into a cycle of production, advertising and consumption, creating logoed t-shirts, outsourced perfumes and cheap jewelry (Clarke and Holt, 2016).

4.3 Consumers’ counter culture questioning Westwood’s pol-ethical activism

Consumers’ participation in the world of Vivienne Westwood has been rich and variegated. Although the brand and Westwood have been largely appreciated by their social media followers, a vast group of consumers exist that cast doubts on the authenticity and real commitment of Vivienne Westwood’s to her professed pol-ethical activism and affiliation to punk ideology and values.

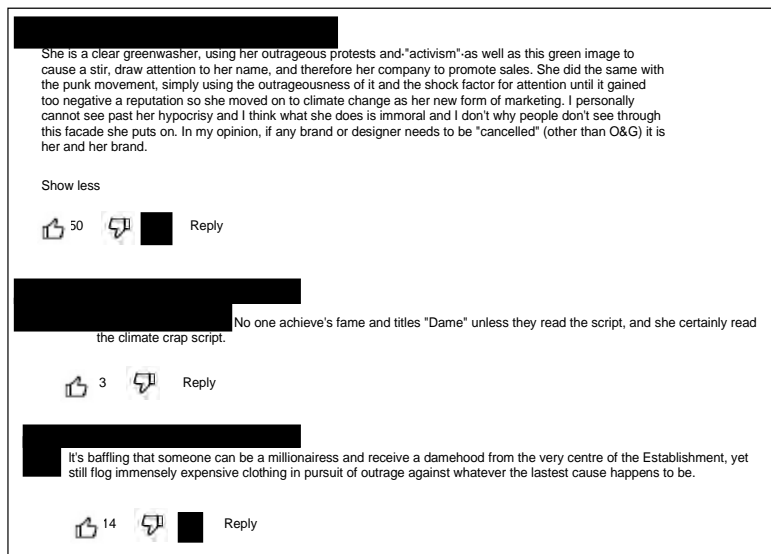
The harsh critique, propagated and amplified on social media platforms, has triggered a controversial and heated counter-cultural debate primarily revolving around two key themes: 1) consumers have questioned Westwood’s commitment to a plethora of different socio-political themes

without a clear focal point. This multifaceted engagement with multiple causes has led consumers to perceive Westwood's activism as superficial; 2) consumers have highlighted the mismatches between Westwood's affiliation to punk ideology and her brand positioning.

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- 1) Vivienne Westwood has long proclaimed herself an activist, a beacon of social change, and an advocate for various causes. However, in recent times, a growing number of consumers have started to accuse her to be a 'catch-all values' activist. Based on our archival and netnographic analysis, this accusation is rooted in Westwood's personal history and past business practices. She began her career as a punk political designer, when she endorsed social construction of female power and sex liberation and actively protested against Queen Elizabeth II and later against Margaret Thatcher (Westwood and Kelly, 2014). However, since these political interests and protests failed to generate attention and equity for her brand (Westwood and Kelly, 2014), she later redirected her focus toward other causes, such as fighting against tradition, sustaining sustainable production, human rights, and climate change. This multifaceted array of interests has prompted consumers to question the depth and authenticity of her socio-political commitment. Our analysis of social media conversations highlights that consumers blame Westwood for picking up commitment by selecting the causes that are trendy and reflect the "*flavour of the month, the current thing to protest about*", rather than showing a permanent and unwavering dedication. For consumers, this perception gains strength from the fact that her protests were "*unsustained over any length of time and had no significant lasting value*", which renders her commitment "*superficial and suspicious*", seemingly tailored to "*pander to the public and trends by tapping into the most current way of thinking*". This idea was particularly widespread, as evidenced by the engagement metrics of this single YouTube comment. It reached 611 views, received 41 likes, and generated 13 replies, all of which reinforced this viewpoint. Not only Westwood is blamed for her shifting commitments, consumers argue that her choices were more strategically-driven rather than ethically-inspired. Westwood revolved her attention toward those socio-political causes that could benefit her personally and her brand. In Figure 1, which highlights a dynamic discussion on YouTube, consumers suggest that Westwood initially aligned herself with the punk movement, leveraging its cultural influence until it encountered what they term a "*too negative reputation*". Subsequently, she transitioned her activism "*to climate change as her new form of marketing*". Indeed, the interest on climate change served her as a vehicle to "*draw attention to her name and therefore her company to promote sales*". Furthermore, it resulted in the prestigious title of "*Dame*" being conferred upon her (see YouTube comments in Figure 1). This viewpoint was also widely shared, as evidenced by the number of likes the comment received in this conversation: a total of 67 likes (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Consumers blaming Vivienne Westwood to be strategically-committed to socio-political causes for personal gains



Source: YouTube

As a result, the 'catch-all' engagement of Vivienne Westwood in numerous trendy socio-political themes has diminished the perceived authenticity of her self-narrative in the eyes of consumers, who have harshly created a counter-narrative that conversationally constructs Westwood as a superficial, suspicious, and strategically-driven fake political activist.

2) In their counter-narrative, consumers also blame the discrepancies between Westwood's professed punk ideologies and the positioning of her brand. More than a political activist, Westwood consistently branded herself as a "punk provocateur" since the beginning of her career (Westwood and Kelly, 2014, p. 164). However, consumers raise substantial critiques against Westwood's brand communication campaigns, which according to consumers profoundly contradict the punk ideals. In social media conversations, consumers recurrently criticize the campaign "Buy less. Buy well and make it last". The campaign comprised a press release, a lookbook, and a short film published on Westwood brand's website and social media. The film showcases the collection and concludes with Westwood herself, alongside a model, both wearing a T-shirt on the runway displaying the message "Buy Less". Figure 2, sourced from Westwood's Official Website, captures this closing scene. As visible in the photo, the "finale" goes beyond the t-shirts. The subjects hold torches while framed against a virtual background depicting flames. According to Westwood, this imagery is inspired by Taoism and aims to convey the idea that consumerism is fueling the destruction of our planet, but with the same intensity, we can combat this vicious cycle of consumption buying less clothes.

Fig. 2: Westwood metaphorically burning down consumerism in the final frame of the lookbook for the campaign “Buy Less. Buy well and make it last”

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Source: Vivienne Westwood Official Website

Our analysis of social media conversations highlights that consumers see a paradox between the overarching message of this campaign and the actual business practices of the brand: a plethora of consumers blame Westwood for her decision to incessantly launch new collections, *“it’s a bit ironic after years of selling brand new collection after collection”*, *“she is an absolute hypocrite with her activism rubbish. How can the creator of such a huge global brand protests on consumerism when her company contributes so much to it with production, transports, sourcing”* and *“How about u STOP making new clothes if you really want to reduce!??”*. Just these three specific Instagram comments generated a total of 138 likes, indicating that many other consumers also shared the same idea. Furthermore, consumers draw attention to a misalignment between the campaign message and the foundational punk principles centered around the rejection of class differentiations. They emphasize that, despite the campaign’s emphasis on acquiring high-quality products, Westwood continues to market her ostensibly *“overpriced clothes”* to *“elite and bourgeoisie”*. This discrepancy led consumers to interpret the campaign message as an endorsement of the upper class of society, consequently eroding the essence of punk ethos that staunchly advocates for egalitarianism.

Finally, also the campaign “Handmade with Love”, which was supposed to present the ultimate actualization of an ethical fashion project, has been harshly criticized by consumers. The campaign, represented in Figure 3, was a carousel of photos featuring Vivienne Westwood, elegantly attired in gold and laces, selling handbags and handmade jewelry laid out on a paper carpet amidst the African slums.

Fig. 3: “Handmade with Love” campaign, produced by Vivienne Westwood in the streets of Nairobi in 2015



Source: The Mail & Guardian.com

The campaign on social media generated a hatred debate, with consumers describing it as “gross”, “distasteful”, “so wrong on many levels”, “embarrassing”, “disgusting”, “out of torch” and “unsettling and aesthetically unappealing”. Figure 4, highlights a specific selection of comments from the campaign Instagram discussion. These comments, alone obtaining an engagement of 250 likes (see Figure 4), reveal a critical response to it, pointing at the mismatches between Westwood’s declared values against capitalism and white-supremacy and the visuals in the camping, particularly her portrayal. She appears as the sole white figure “dressed in couture garments in the slums of Africa surrounded by the natives”. Consumers accuse her of being a hypocrite, asserting that she has forsaken her “punk roots” and is now projecting herself as a “white savior”, while exploiting the poverty of Africa and black inhabitants to promote her own initiative (Figure 4).

Fig. 4: Consumers’ comment on the inconsistency between Vivienne Westwood’s anti-white supremacy punk ideology and her communication campaign in Nairobi



Source: Instagram

Consumers' criticism remains persistent over time: in 2018, after the publication of an article in *The Guardian*, which chronicled Vivienne Westwood's activist actions over the years also referring to the "Handmade with Love campaign", consumers used the article as a platform to voice their views on the campaign, sharing comments such as "*I find it very hard to take Viv W's latest statement seriously. Her current advertising campaign features couture clothes and goods that cost small fortunes, spread out in the poverty stricken African urban market setting. The Mockery she makes of countries mired in poverty while their political elites stock up bling such as hers is just beyond tacky*". Therefore, by presenting herself as a wealthy, white woman adorned in luxury products within the slums, consumers perceive Vivienne Westwood as accentuating the narrative of capitalist inequality and white supremacy, a stance that she had ostensibly declared herself against.

As a result, consumers' counter-narrative recurrently label Vivienne Westwood a "grifter" and a "*walking contradiction of punk*". This is mainly due to her declaration against capitalism while yielding her brand to the market logic in a way that "*benefitted so highly off of capitalism*" "*becoming super rich*".

These inconsistencies between Vivienne Westwood's professed affiliation with the punk subculture and her branding strategy have fueled consumer uncertainty regarding her authenticity and have, in turn, led to disillusionment among consumers. They find it challenging to reconcile her activist stance with her branding and communication practices, and this incongruity has cast doubt on the sincerity of her commitment to the causes she champions.

5. Discussion: The urgency of an ethical leader of meanings

In the realm of Vivienne Westwood's fashion empire, her commitments as activist takes precedence over the brand leader, often leading to provocative clashes between Westwood's political ethos and the brand positioning and its commercial pursuits.

How could have the brand navigated through the tensions and the clashes that arose from Westwood's bold and provocative activism?

From a strategic communication standpoint, leadership communication retains a crucial role for the success of any organization: leadership communication is embedded in concrete actions and statements through which organizations can establish social relations and enable discussions and confrontations from which joint perceptions and meanings might arise (Zerfass and Huck, 2007).

Our critical case shows that Vivienne Westwood failed to exert a 'leadership of meanings' (Zerfass and Huck, 2007) and take the responsibility to articulate a cohesive vision for her brand. While she undoubtedly generated a plethora of meanings that could have inspired societal betterment, in doing so she adopted a self-referential and provocative attitude that was not aimed at including or guiding others (and

specifically her brand) toward a common purpose. On the contrary, she was driven by a solipsistic, ego-centered intent to liberate herself and to express her freedom to contradict, to generate disruption, to fight against everything that could be fought against in a socio-political background characterized by ongoing turmoil. Based on our findings, Westwood's activism represented for sure a provocative sociopolitical force; however, it missed a strategic use of storytelling and corporate communication that could have minimized and managed the discrepancies, transforming also her brand in a societal change agent (Key *et al.*, 2021). While the principles of strategic communication for a postmodern activist society advocate for a Foucauldian management of 'ethics as aesthetics' (Holtzhausen, 2013, p. 38), where the liberating effort of the self in the exercise of leadership of meanings is aimed at transforming society by incorporating, guiding, and sensitizing with all the stakeholder groups, Westwood refused to assume this leadership role, being more inclined to critique than to construct. As consumers' counter-cultural online discourse shows, her cherry-picking activist narrative was perceived more as the voice of an opportunistic marketing intent to embrace a catch-all woke washing strategy rather than an organic, authentic manifestation of a transformative ethos that is backed up by a strategic approach to communicating with stakeholders.

A strategic communication approach would have required a long-term commitment to a single cause. A commitment fueled by an open, two-way confrontation, negotiation, and sensitization on that cause, which incorporates her company's internal stakeholders in charge of managing her brand, consumers, institutions and all the other societal stakeholders meant as partners in pursuing the brand purpose (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014; Romenti, 2010). A commitment where Westwood, in expressing her true self and liberating her creative force, assumes the role of an ethical leader of meanings.

Being an ethical leader of meanings implies that the meanings which are created and shared are the result of the alignment between the values of the entrepreneur as a person and the values of the entrepreneur's brand as a for-profit company that marketizes a lifestyle for societal betterment. Moreover, while now leaders are expected to react quickly to sociopolitical issues (Nam *et al.*, 2023), the ethical leader of meanings is one that engages in a durable and long-term ethical effort that is aimed at transforming society, beyond shaking and contrasting it. This ethical effort of transforming society is constructed in every day communication acts that are conceived of as part of a strategic communication approach embraced by the leader that extends to her company and the way the company engages in interactions with all the stakeholders, so as to manage the company as a communication-oriented organization (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011).

When communication is strategically managed, "leaders think in longer time frames, see their own organizational units in the context of larger realities, emphasize intangible assets related to their interaction with followers (visions, values, and so on), think in terms of renewal and have political skills to deal with different stakeholders" (Witherspoon, 1997, p. 2).

So, what is the role that strategic communication should have in supporting leaders to face such delicate matters? Our netnographic analysis highlights that Westwood's activism deliberately neglected the need for a vision and a guidance, in a word a brand leadership, that could have acted as the custodian of the alignment between the voice of the activist Westwood and the brand messages.

In strategic communication in fact, leadership requires framing which involves emphasizing or deemphasizing particular aspects of political and social reality to make them more salient in communication, to promote a particular problem definition, its interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment (Hallahan, 2011, p. 178). To conclude then, transforming society through an ethical leadership of meanings that navigates the tensions inherent to the clash between ideology, purpose, capitalist critique and capitalist commodification, requires that communication is strategically conceived as the conscience of the organization (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). In this way strategic communication can frame a purposeful metanarrative of ethical behavior that can inspire the betterment (Holtzhausen, 2013) and create opportunities for the growth of the brand along with society. Being the conscience means then for strategic communication to become a leading compass that constantly works to smoothen the harshness of the tensional territories that entrepreneurs, brand leaders, companies, and society inhabit. A critical conscience that listens and includes the multiplicity of instances and voices of all stakeholders and aligns them with the leader's personal ethos and vision and the brand's strategic goals.

On a pragmatic level, strategic communication today is called upon to become a moral guide. Brand activism is fundamentally a moral issue (Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024; Wannow *et al.*, 2024), which firstly requires the ability to identify, in a divisive cause, the position that the company can most credibly maintain, and secondly, the ability to build the authenticity of the adopted position over time by constructing a narrative that coherently incorporates the meanings expressed by the leaders. Today, more and more companies, after experiencing and also enduring the risks of activism, are withdrawing from this commitment. They are putting the brakes on activism. Or they purposively develop enticing brand activism narratives with which strategic communication complies with stakeholders' expectations but that are not back up in corporate facts and conducts. We believe that strategic communication at this historical moment can be defined as such if it possesses the courage to act as the company's moral compass and as a strategic thread that can create a dialogue between the brand DNA, its leaders, consumers, and stakeholders to navigate and resolve ethical tensions and become a force for change and societal betterment.

Future research is needed that not only explores and reveals those tensions at societal level that are amplified and nurtured in social media platforms, but also educates and inspires corporate leaders and communication leaders to become ethical leaders, fostering an open dialogue that incorporates and co-constructs on a continuous basis the shifting stakes of the company and of its stakeholders. In this regard,

studies like ours could be stretched further to include an educational scope, soliciting the creation of a table of discussion or other moments of informal and formal confrontation (i.e., round tables, seminars, think tanks) where the research scholars and the communication leaders of the investigated companies debate, exchange ideas and experiment innovations on how to pursue an ethical positioning of the company that is credible, authentic, sustainable and beneficial to both company and stakeholders over time.

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Strategic communication and greenwashing: Theoretical reflections and managerial implications

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *The widespread occurrence of greenwashing presents significant challenges for companies in effectively communicating their sustainability efforts. As sustainability communication becomes an increasingly strategic asset for organisations, addressing the issue of greenwashing is crucial to maintaining credibility and trust with stakeholders. This study explores the intricate landscape of greenwashing and its implications for strategic communication in the realm of sustainability transition.*

Purpose of the paper: *Given the complexity and evolving nature of greenwashing phenomena, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive reflection on the role, research directions and managerial implications of a strategic communication approach designed to prevent greenwashing.*

Methodology: *This integrative literature review synthesises the existing research to develop a nuanced understanding of greenwashing and its mitigation through strategic communication.*

Findings: *The study reveals a notable gap in considering strategic communication perspectives within the context of greenwashing. Despite the continual emergence of new forms of greenwashing, research predominantly focuses on the supposed benefits and harms resulting from discrepancies between corporate talk and action. This paper argues that more attention should be devoted to comprehending and controlling the fundamental processes that result in such misalignments.*

Research limits: *This integrative literature review is limited by the inherent constraints of a deductive approach based on existing literature.*

Practical implications: *The research provides several practical recommendations for decision-makers to prevent accusations of greenwashing and mitigate the associated negative consequences. These recommendations include adopting a systemic approach to strategic communication, enhancing transparency, and fostering genuine stakeholder engagement.*

Originality of the paper: *This paper pioneers examining unresolved issues in sustainability communication contributing to entrenched greenwashing practices.*

Key words: *greenwashing; strategic communication; CSR communication; integrative literature review; greenwashing.*

1. Introduction

Sustainability and associated communication related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become a pivotal concern for businesses,

consumers, and policymakers in recent years (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Verk *et al.*, 2021). As organisations strive to meet the growing demand for environmentally responsible practices, the phenomenon of greenwashing has emerged as a significant challenge. Companies' increasing attempts to explicitly communicate and disseminate their social responsibility and environmental programs and practices to different audiences are due to several reasons: the need to comply with the latest and more stringent regulations in terms of environmental and social impact, the growing concern of public opinion regarding sustainability issues, the pressing requests from stakeholders and consumers, etc. (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Szabo and Webster, 2021). The potential associated benefits (e.g., social legitimation, favourable reputation, access to financial resources at lower costs) have further accelerated this process.

At the same time, many companies have tried to take shortcuts without having truly integrated sustainability into their corporate principles and values, or they have made strategic mistakes in their communication approach, creating a disconnect between *talk* and *actions* in order to appear more sustainable than they really are (Vollero, 2022). This phenomenon is generally known as greenwashing. While in its clumsier expressions, it is easily unmasked, greenwashing remains a defining trait of today's society. In more recent years, less sophisticated forms of greenwashing seem to be decreasing due to increasing social scrutiny by various stakeholders, facilitated by digital media, while the symbolic dimensions of identity washing, not always characterised by deliberate or intentional acts, are becoming increasingly pervasive (Bowen, 2014).

Recently, the European Commission, through national enforcement authorities (grouped in the Consumer Protection Cooperation Network (CPC), published an investigation into violations of EU consumer rights on corporate websites (European Commission, 2021), including greenwashing among the identified practices. The results showed doubtful, ambiguous or misleading claims regarding the reliability and completeness of information in 42% of cases. Also corroborating the evident 'emergency' of greenwashing is an analysis by The Economist (2021), which found the inclusion of controversial companies with greenwashing severe issues, such as fossil fuel producers (Exxon Mobil, Chinese coal mining companies), tobacco and gambling firms, among the top 20 ESG funds.

Communication studies provide various lenses through which to understand and address greenwashing. Two primary theoretical streams are the functionalist and constructionist/formative approaches (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). The functionalist approach views communication as a tool for information transmission, emphasising clarity and efficiency. In contrast, the constructionist approach sees communication as a process of meaning-making, focusing on how different stakeholders interpret and understand messages. Both these approaches (functionalist vs constructivist) have had difficulties interpreting and countering degenerative phenomena such as greenwashing.

The strategic communication approach, which integrates elements of both these different theoretical streams, is particularly relevant to our study. It involves deliberate, goal-oriented communication efforts aimed

at shaping public perception and organisational identity (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2013). More generally, a significant proportion of the theories and models of sustainability communication have a predominantly strategic matrix, epistemologically originating from managerial and/or organisational effectiveness studies that support a positive relationship between sustainability activities and corporate (economic) performance (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Deetz, 2007; Golob *et al.*, 2013). However, this positive relationship is threatened by allegations of greenwashing that can also involve companies genuinely oriented towards sustainability due to the *self-promoter's paradox* (Gosselt *et al.*, 2019)¹. On the other hand, although literature with a predominantly constructivist approach has contested this mainstream framework, as it is positivist and functionalist (see, among others, Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), greenwashing behaviours have often been seen within the tension between individual companies and stakeholders, without exploring their underlying processes.

Within the realm of greenwashing, concepts related to a strategic communication approach, such as sense-making, sense-giving, and systemic perspectives, are also critical. Sense-making/sense-giving refers to the processes through which organisations interpret and communicate their actions to stakeholders; it is the process that shapes public perception of organisational identity in company-stakeholder interactions. A systemic perspective, instead, considers the broader context in which communication occurs, including the interplay of various organisational and environmental factors.

By acknowledging the current complexity of greenwashing phenomena, this paper aims to explore how a strategic communication approach can address the emergence of greenwashing. Both theoretical and managerial arguments underpin this exploration. Theoretically, understanding greenwashing through a strategic communication lens provides deeper insights into the underlying processes that drive such behaviours. Managerially, organisations can better mitigate the risks of greenwashing by adopting more reflective and transparent communication strategies. We employ an integrative literature review as our primary method to achieve this. An integrative approach allows us to synthesise diverse perspectives and findings from existing research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The paper offers several insights into integrating sustainability principles to activate a virtuous circle of sense-giving/sense-making in strategic communication, where the company can recognise the contribution of stakeholders in relevant decisions: a perspective that integrates different theoretical approaches seems to be the most promising for addressing challenges on these issues. The work aims to take a holistic view by integrating the literature and shifting the focus from individual

¹ The term 'self-promoter's paradox' refers to the fact that communicating CSR efforts is a necessity that cannot be avoided, but at the same time, excessive communication about these aspects can induce scepticism, both towards the message and the company, and call into question the motivations behind why the company communicates. Given the overall emphasis that companies place on this type of message, this phenomenon can have negative repercussions even for companies genuinely oriented towards sustainability.

2. Research design

This paper is based on an integrated literature review that critically analyses and synthesises the most representative studies on a topic in a unified way to generate new perspectives on the issue (Torraco, 2005). This methodology is the most appropriate choice for this work, as it is meant to develop a reflection on how a strategic communication approach can address the greenwashing emergency. Adopting an integrative review allows us to develop a comprehensive conceptualisation (Creswell, 2007) of strategic communication in the context of greenwashing research. Unlike quantitative approaches focusing on measuring the prevalence or impact of specific greenwashing issues, an integrative review enables us to critically reflect on the conceptual underpinnings and practical implications of strategic communication in this context. This approach avoids using quantitative metrics of systematic literature reviews (e.g., frequency analysis) because the vast literature in greenwashing research would have made the analysis inconclusive for the present research aim (Snyder, 2019), while it is suitable for developing nuanced insights and identifying specific gaps in the current literature that can inform future research and practice.

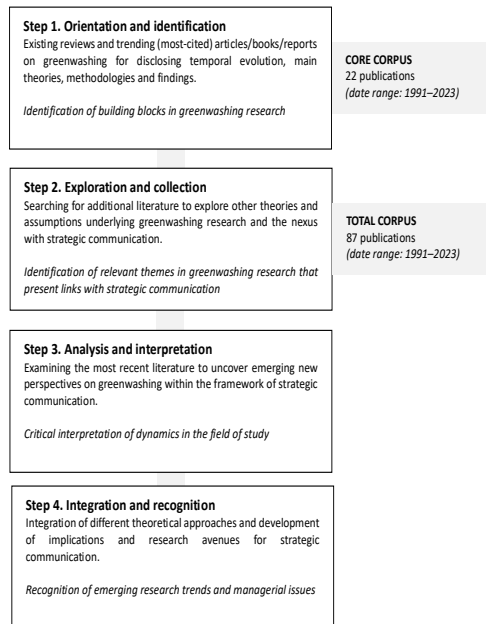
On these lines, a four-stage process was followed to develop the integrated review (see Figure 1):

- Phase 1: *Orientation and identification*;
- Phase 2: *Exploration and collection*;
- Phase 3: *Analysis and interpretation*;
- Phase 4: *Integration and recognition*.

The first phase (Orientation and identification) involved identifying an initial set of publications of interest, including books, book chapters, conference proceedings and journal articles. Criteria used to identify this first set of publications include the relevance (editorial placement) and popularity (most-cited) of publications, considering both Scopus and Google Scholar databases. As for the time horizon, a starting date (1991) related to the first academic use of the term 'greenwashing' was set. The initial corpus consists of 22 publications: 20 journal articles (both research papers and literature reviews), one book and one report. These publications from the first group were then analysed and summarised, paying particular attention to temporal evolution, authorship, theories, methodologies and primary findings reported in these studies. In the subsequent expansion of material and additional exploration of the literature (Phase 2: Exploration and collection), relevant themes in greenwashing research were selected based on the criteria that they had conceptual connections with strategic communication. These include constructs such as decoupling, legitimisation strategies, sense-making/sense-giving, etc. (these dimensions are presented and discussed in Section 3). The available material was thus expanded by

conducting specific searches (combining the aspects of greenwashing and deception with more specific ones of communication) in the principal academic databases and search engines, particularly Scopus and Google Scholar. In order to minimise the risk of data entropy and to streamline the interpretation of the findings, we ceased collecting additional material once we attained a satisfactory level of informative depth, as suggested by Snyder (2019).

Fig. 1: Research design of the study



Source: our elaboration

The first two phases helped identify the critical issues and essential elements in analysing the phenomenon of greenwashing, considering it a strategic issue. After completing Phase 3 (*Analysis and interpretation*), the review focused on integrating and examining the most recent literature to uncover emerging new perspectives on greenwashing within the framework of strategic communication. An inductive process was used to conduct the analysis (by mapping definitions, different theoretical lenses, methods, empirical approaches), thus providing a critical interpretation of current dynamics in this area while also pointing out emerging research trends and managerial issues that can inform future research and managerial practice.

3. Analysis of the results

The review highlights the lack of attention paid to the strategic communication perspective, meaning the communication process used by an organisation to fulfil its mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Explanations

of greenwashing behaviours tend to focus primarily on the supposed benefits obtainable from the dissonance between talk and action when not discovered by stakeholders rather than questioning the management of the actual processes that lead to such phenomena. For an in-depth analysis, the results were divided according to the main theoretical approaches and related central constructs used in greenwashing research.

3.1 Institutional and legitimacy theory

Studies adopting both institutional and legitimacy theories (Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Marquis *et al.*, 2016; Testa *et al.*, 2018; Zharfpeykan, 2021) tend to explain greenwashing behaviours in the social, regulatory, normative, cognitive and/or cultural context in which the company operates, often without dwelling on the intentional or unintentional nature of the behaviours and communication process management. In these theoretical approaches, communication strategy is considered to be naturally oriented towards acquiring different forms of legitimacy (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Stratling, 2007), and in any case, essential to achieving legitimacy itself (“legitimacy management rests heavily on communication” - Suchman, 1995, p. 586). Greenwashing thus derives from companies’ efforts to maintain or extend legitimacy levels (Laufer, 2003).

For example, Hahn and Lülfs (2014) identified six legitimisation strategies adopted by companies (included in two primary stock indices, the Dow Jones and Dax) to avoid disclosing the negative aspects within their sustainability reports. It was emphasised that symbolic legitimisation strategies (strategies of marginalisation and abstraction) were the most widely used form in reports to influence stakeholder perceptions and gain legitimacy, even if they did not fully comply with the impartiality required by Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines. Similarly, in the tourism sector, Font *et al.* (2012) found that perceived threats to social legitimacy impacted some hospitality sector businesses and pushed them to provide self-referential disclosures to satisfy stakeholders.

3.2 Impression management

Studies drawing from the impression management literature align with a strategic approach to communication as they examine the strategies organisations use to influence stakeholder perceptions (Solomon *et al.*, 2013; Talbot and Boiral, 2015; Hassan *et al.*, 2020). Impression management studies have mainly sought to identify organisations’ strategies to shape stakeholder perceptions about them (Bansal and Clelland, 2004; Solomon *et al.*, 2013). To this end, greenwashing itself should be interpreted within this theoretical framework (Hassan *et al.*, 2020): impression management thus includes reporting and communication activities when perceived as artificially amplifying positive information while downplaying negative data on the company’s sustainability performance. Impression management techniques for sustainability communication have been classified into two main groups (Perks *et al.*, 2013; Boiral *et al.*, 2022): (a) proactive strategies, such as self-promotion, exemplification, acclamation,

etc., when companies exaggerate their own (alleged) sustainability efforts; (b) defensive tactics, for example, justifications, excuses etc., when companies tend to avoid taking responsibility for their wrong behaviours and/or irresponsible practices. These strategies can give rise to various deceptive communication solutions (Hamza and Jarboui, 2022), ranging from rhetorical and thematic manipulation to deception through visual and structural elements of the narrative², to the (false) attribution of performances (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2011).

3.3 Signalling theory

Based on signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly *et al.*, 2011), companies oriented towards sustainability are more likely to disclose positive information about their sustainability activities to indicate their greater commitment to various stakeholders (Karaman *et al.*, 2020), unlike those with poor sustainability performance, who may find it costlier to implement the relevant signals (Habib and Hasan, 2019). In other words, according to this theoretical framework, the costs for companies that do not communicate honestly (i.e., greenwashers) will outweigh the benefits (Mahoney *et al.*, 2013), making the greenwashing behaviour ineffective.

More generally, studies adopting this theoretical approach focus on demonstrating a strong correlation between sustainability/CSR performance and communication/reporting, citing sectors such as energy (Karaman *et al.*, 2021) and logistics (Uyar *et al.*, 2020). Other studies (e.g., Garrido *et al.*, 2020) argue that the balance between signals is much more complex, with situations arising in which the transmission of information in specific contexts (e.g., absence of sanctions for greenwashers) can favour a tendency towards greenwashing because it depends on both the level of rewards and the expected costs for less sustainable companies (Seele and Gatti, 2017; Conte *et al.*, 2023).

3.4 Attribution theory

Studies adopting attribution theory focus on the consumer perspective, seeking to explain the various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that lead to the perception of greenwashing behaviours (Nyilasy *et al.*, 2014; Ginder *et al.*, 2021). These studies provide important operational indications for strategic communication, as they demonstrate how different stakeholders actually process messages. This theoretical framework is ideal for understanding consumer responses to sustainability communication (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). Given this reasoning, individuals can process why certain companies use 'green' and/or CSR messages. Referring to Heider's (1944) work, attribution theory perspectives on greenwashing suggest two main motivations attributed to CSR communication (Parguel *et al.*, 2011;

² When greenwashing is based on non-verbal elements, it is called 'executional greenwashing'. This term refers to all other aspects of advertising announcements or communication messages that go beyond mere textual/verbal claims, such as images, sounds, evocative symbols of nature, etc., which could convey distorted perceptions regarding the company's actual sustainability commitment (Parguel *et al.*, 2015).

Nyilasy *et al.*, 2014; Ginder *et al.*, 2021): (a) intrinsic (or dispositional) motives, when individuals perceive an authentic commitment of the company to environmental and social issues; (b) extrinsic (or situational) motives, when consumers see the association between the company and sustainability factors as self-referential.

3.5 Communicative constitution of organisations

Unlike other approaches, the ‘communicative constitution of organisations’ (CCO) considers CSR communication and associated greenwashing as a dynamic process in which companies, institutions, stakeholders, etc., use various forms of communication to negotiate the meanings associated with CSR and sustainability. Specific ‘authoritative texts’ (such as CSR and sustainability reports) are therefore critical in shaping organisational activities and practices (Siano *et al.*, 2017). The influence of these communication artefacts can generate virtuous practices, such as aspirational talk (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013), in which even if the communication does not correspond to current practices, it can serve to stimulate positive organisational changes (Christensen *et al.*, 2010). According to Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013), not all CSR communication practices can be associated with greenwashing since even decoupled communication (i.e., a gap between words and actions) can result in positive outcomes. Although communication can be beneficial even when it does not reflect current practices, it is not easy to understand the conditions under which it is effective: it has been found that unrealistic objectives or practices that are not truly absorbed by organisational structures can result in even more unscrupulous forms of greenwashing, such as deceptive manipulation (Siano *et al.*, 2017)³.

In strategic terms, the constructivist perspective on greenwashing suggests the importance of understanding stakeholders’ actual participation in CSR activities and decisions. Other actors’ involvement and/or engagement can shape the meanings in CSR discourse, thus reducing the risk of self-referential practices or, even worse, unethical practices.

4. Strategic communication to prevent greenwashing: managerial implications and future research directions

As a result of our analysis, we examined how greenwashing has affected the core dimensions of strategic communication (organised listening, reflective communication, etc.) and what implications may be derived. Consistent with Zerfass *et al.* (2020), it should be clarified that greenwashing has the characteristics of a strategic issue because it stems from changes in factors of strategic complexity (primarily environmental and social factors). Greenwashing is, therefore, of specific interest to those dealing with strategic communication. Moreover, if strategic

³ Deceptive manipulation refers to the manipulation of business practices to back up green claims, such as, for example, Volkswagen’s development of a system to fraudulently alter CO2 emissions and support statements of leadership in sustainability (Siano *et al.*, 2017).

communication impacts the public sphere, it is of primary importance to understand the mechanisms through which it can be subject to accusations of greenwashing and how to prevent them.

The integrative literature review identified multiple theoretical approaches that enrich our understanding of the core processes of strategic communication that underlie greenwashing. These aspects of strategic communication are presented along with the main future research lines intersecting the research on greenwashing in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Implications and future research avenues

Core Processes of Strategic Communication	Research Lines	Description	Main Theoretical Approaches
Organised listening	Stakeholder engagement	Investigate how strategic communication can enhance genuine stakeholder engagement to build legitimacy and trust. Analyse the processes of jointly creating meaning with stakeholders by avoiding talk-action disconnection.	Stakeholder theory; legitimacy theory; CCO
Reflective communication	Legitimacy over time	Explore how strategic communication can support long-term legitimacy without falling into accusations of greenwashing	Legitimacy theory, CCO
Strategic communication decisions	Signal credibility	Study the impact of differentiated effects of CSR signals' visibility and cost on stakeholder perceptions and greenwashing risks.	Signalling theory
Operational communication decisions	Third-party endorsements	Analyse the role of third-party endorsements in mitigating scepticism and enhancing credibility in CSR communication.	Impression management; attribution theory; others
	Social media dynamics	Examine how social media and user-generated content affect perceptions of CSR communication and greenwashing.	

Source: our elaboration

Organised listening

From greenwashing studies drawing on legitimacy theory, it can be inferred, consistently with the arguments of Ihlen and Verhoeven (2015), that the most important task of strategic communication is to ensure that the organisation's mission is considered legitimate (Holmström *et al.*, 2009), with the best understanding between the organisation and the public as the basis. Criticalities in the organised listening process (Invernizzi, 2004) can compromise the understanding of stakeholders' distinctive features. Unidirectional approaches (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010) or few contact points with stakeholders (Peloza and Falkenberg, 2009) not only limit collaboration with various stakeholders but also risk triggering processes of signification (sense-giving/sense-making) that then prove fragile when subjected to public scrutiny.

Regarding the need for organised listening that is genuine rather than superficial and that integrates processes of two-way symmetric communication (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), one should also consider

the implications of the CCO approach (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). In this approach, the processes of jointly creating meaning always emerge from interactions between the parties involved. The CCO perspective emphasises that both internal and external stakeholders contribute to shaping organisational discourse through engaged dialogue and collaboration. A one-sided, top-down approach risks overlooking essential perspectives that could strengthen legitimacy and trust if meaningfully included in strategic communication processes.

Reflective communication

In reflective communication, this is even more evident, as it relies on organised listening activities to assist decision-makers in developing a signification framework for organisations by placing them in the public sphere (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). Legitimacy cannot be achieved through improvised strategies, which may lead to greenwashing. Instead, it must be pursued communicatively to explore how companies and the public co-create meaning (Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2015). In terms of future research, it would be appropriate to investigate how strategic communication can support a certain level of legitimisation over time without incurring accusations of greenwashing. Such an analysis would also be helpful considering that accusations of greenwashing are more frequent when commitment to sustainability issues is perceived as a short-term promise (Pomering and Johnson, 2009; Kim and Lyon, 2015) and, therefore, the company's position is seen as opportunistic.

Strategic communication decisions (strategy formulation)

The decision-making elements downstream of strategic communication activities (strategic and operational communication decisions) also deserve to be rethought in light of the greenwashing 'emergency'.

Strategic communication decisions, through which the communication strategy is formulated, define the organisational reputation target level and the set of corporate identity resources (Siano *et al.*, 2013). Without proper elaboration of previous phases, such decisions risk creating the prerequisites for accusations of greenwashing. In this sense, signalling theory can shed light on the differentiated effects of the signals generated by the set of corporate identity resources in sustainability communication initiatives (Berrone *et al.*, 2017; Conte *et al.*, 2023). The main dimensions of signal visibility and cost are crucial to understanding the relevance of each signal for different types of stakeholders. Without such an evaluation, estimating target levels of reputation is complex. Future studies could investigate how specific CSR signals are likely to be perceived as inauthentic (i.e. at risk of greenwashing accusations) considering both the credibility of the signalling party (company/agency or communication consultant) and contextual factors (such as normative and regulatory pressures, sanctions against greenwashing, etc.).

Operational communication decisions (strategy implementation)

The execution of the communication strategy is the most critical phase for the risk of greenwashing precisely because it is continuously

subject to stakeholder assessment (Vollero, 2013). Both studies using impression management and those referring to attribution theory as a theoretical framework have provided extensive empirical evidence of how different stakeholders (and consumers in particular) perceive green claims and organisations' statements about sustainability. From a strategic communication perspective, the crucial issue is aligning the implementation of operational activities and specific tactics with what has been strategically developed (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). In more detail, studies that have dealt with the lack of third-party endorsement (Parguel *et al.*, 2011) in CSR communication have highlighted risks (e.g., scepticism) resulting from incorrect operational choices, mainly when operating without providing specific supporting data or with excessive emphasis on secondary positive aspects (Vollero *et al.*, 2016; Gosselt *et al.*, 2019).

A possible direction for future research could be to integrate all levels of analysis (organisational and sectoral) using mixed methods that start with a quantitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions and then examine the content of corporate documents and materials (reports, ads, websites, social media, etc.), in order to assess the use and effectiveness of neutralisation techniques to reduce impressions of greenwashing (Talbot and Boiral, 2015; Boiral *et al.*, 2022). By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, researchers could provide a more holistic understanding of how organisations communicate about sustainability initiatives and whether communication strategies help align words with actions or risk the perception of greenwashing. Such integrated analyses could offer valuable insights into improving strategic communication practices⁴.

Regarding strategy execution, the results of the present integrative review also draw attention to the choice of channels in intra- and inter-organisational dynamics. Adopting a constructivist communication perspective, the classical distinction between internal and external communication is ineffective (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Vollero, 2022). Since communication is constitutive of the organisation (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), any communicative act relating to the organisation is formative, regardless of whether it is produced internally (management, employees) or externally (customers, media, NGOs, other stakeholders). Consequently, corporate boundaries become less defined as third parties can interact in dialogues with organisational members and shape practices related to CSR and sustainability. The choice of communication channels must consider the porous nature of boundaries and the cooperative dynamic between internal and external communicative actions.

An exciting challenge for strategic communication researchers could be to deepen the understanding of how social dynamics and communicative interactions reduce (or amplify) the level of greenwashing, also considering the use of social media (and associated user-generated content), which constitutes a natural extension of the CSR communication mix (Capriotti, 2011; Vollero *et al.*, 2021). Social platforms enable broader stakeholder participation and influence in organisational discourse through sharing,

⁴ Neutralisation techniques constitute the impression management tactics used to rationalise, through socially acceptable arguments, the occurrence of incorrect behaviours or negative impacts.

commenting and networking. Examining how transparency, authentic engagement and neutralisation techniques play out in these contexts could provide valuable insights into supporting more sustainable and legitimate strategic CSR communication practices over time.

5. Beyond greenwashing: between strategic silence and (eco)system dynamics

Building upon the theoretical foundations and managerial implications discussed in the previous sections, this section further explores two critical areas: the concept of 'strategic silence', or 'greenhushing', and the systemic dynamics of greenwashing. These areas further illuminate the complexities of strategic communication in the context of sustainability and offer new avenues for research and managerial practice.

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of organised listening, reflective communication, and strategic communication decisions to mitigate the risks of greenwashing. However, some companies adopt a different strategy to avoid the risks associated with sustainability communication: strategic silence or greenhushing. This involves deliberately decreasing their exposure and commitment to sustainability issues in terms of communication. Some authors (Carlos and Lewis, 2018; Ginder *et al.*, 2021) have indeed wondered whether it would not be better for companies to reduce expectations-which, if not met, increase the risks of being accused of greenwashing-simply by avoiding communicating their sustainability activities. In essence, greenhushing consists of an 'inertia strategy' for companies that fear stakeholder judgement of their sustainability initiatives to avoid being put in the spotlight of the media, activists, pundits or researchers. This deliberate inertia is not that rare among companies. In a longitudinal study of companies included in the DJSI, Carlos and Lewis (2018) found that some companies were less likely to exhibit sustainability certifications when they perceived a threat to their legitimacy or reputation.

Consequently, these companies openly chose to reduce communication exposure to avoid greenwashing accusations from potential contradictions in claims decisive for their inclusion in sustainability indexes. The resulting strategic silence reflects a deliberate strategy to resist stakeholder demands. Essentially, these companies avoid any reaction through strategic silence, ignoring these non-market demands (Carlos and Lewis, 2018; Hajmohammad *et al.*, 2021).

A telling example is reported by Waldron *et al.* (2013), who examined the fish procurement practices of the food industry and their response to Greenpeace initiatives to improve supply chain sustainability. Costco, one of the largest American retail corporations for food products, deliberately chose not to respond to the Greenpeace initiative, while other companies yielded to activist demands (Hajmohammad *et al.*, 2021). Similar examples can also be found in the tourism and hospitality sector: Font *et al.* (2017) found that small rural tourism businesses in the Peak District National Park (UK) communicated less than one-third of their sustainability

practices and instead focused on customer experience and the hedonistic attractions of the landscapes, thus avoiding any sense of guilt for tourists visiting these uncontaminated areas.

Greenhushing, therefore, appears as a reaction to growing consumer scepticism and distrust and to the fear of possible backlash from activist protests (Ginder *et al.*, 2021). Knowledge of stakeholder reactions to greenhushing practices is relatively scarce, but the potential effects of these practices cannot be underestimated. When stakeholders perceive strategic silence positions positively (Ginder *et al.*, 2021; Christis *et al.*, 2021), proactive sustainability policies are likely to slow down, as they do not produce additional rewards compared to a discreet positioning on sustainability. On the other hand, industry-level mechanisms and generalised control by different stakeholders could quickly signal companies that choose to be explicitly silent (even if authentically sustainable) and companies that choose silence to mask performance inadequacies regarding social and environmental performance. In the latter case, it is not unlikely that the adverse effects of misleading strategic silence will be similar to those observed for other greenwashing practices.

Beyond individual company actions, the concept of greenwashing needs to be understood within a broader systemic context to adopt an effective strategic communication approach. As highlighted in various studies, the responsibilities attributed to companies often extend beyond their direct actions to include those of their suppliers and other stakeholders (Schrempf-Stirling and Palazzo, 2016). For example, the study by Pizzetti *et al.* (2021) considers greenwashing along the supply chain and identifies a new type of greenwashing: ‘vicarious greenwashing’, which occurs when a company makes claims about its sustainability performance, but these statements are inconsistent with the unethical behaviour of a supplier. Despite the company’s lack of direct responsibility for the supplier’s behaviour, blame can still fall on the company, especially if it did not adequately monitor the supplier’s wrongful actions (Pizzetti *et al.*, 2021).

The expansion of responsibilities must also be viewed from an industry perspective, as greenwashing accusations can quickly transfer from one producer to competing companies, as happened, for example, after the Volkswagen case to the automotive sector (Boiral *et al.*, 2022) or as happens with accusations of poor sustainability that involve all fast fashion companies (Changing Markets, 2021). This implies the need to consider strategic communication responses at the systemic-industry level.

In summary, the phenomenon of greenwashing presents complex challenges for strategic communication. Addressing these challenges requires an integrative approach encompassing individual and systemic perspectives. This paper highlights the need for strategic communication managers to foster transparency, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative efforts across the entire supply chain and industry ecosystems. By doing so, organisations can better navigate the complexities of sustainability communication, mitigate the risks of greenwashing, and contribute to a more sustainable and trustworthy corporate environment. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, researchers can develop

more comprehensive frameworks that inform both academic debates and practical applications in sustainability communication.

Therefore, strategic communication managers should open up to co-creating value frameworks and shared procedures among the actors of the relevant ecosystems to reduce the risk of expanded greenwashing and the related reputational damages to entire production chains. In this direction, a strategic communication approach seems particularly appropriate and can act as a facilitation mechanism for making explicit the purposes of an ecosystem in which the various actors (industry companies, suppliers, consumer associations, and regulatory bodies) contribute to determining the conditions and defining the role that each can play in the ecological transition we are facing.

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Agostino Vollero
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 Strategic communication
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Crafting clarity: a textual framework for optimising strategic communication in Italian banking foundation mission reports

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Abstract

Frame of the research: Situated within the strategic communication and social accountability domains, this research investigates the communicative practices of the most relevant Italian banking foundations. The study examines how these foundations use mission reports to balance regulatory obligations with engaging community narratives.

Purpose of the paper: This paper delves into the realm of mission reports within the context of banking foundation to scrutinise the communicative aspects of these documents and unearth their fundamental characteristics to shed light on prevalent trends and discern potential directives to write them effectively.

Methodology: The study focuses on the Italian banking foundations boasting assets exceeding the billion euros and embraces a methodology that integrates textual analysis such as Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to comprehensively scrutinise their mission reports, investigate the communicative strategies implemented and explore the thematic priorities and accessibility of information dissemination.

Findings: The study reveals a dichotomy in communication approaches among the largest Italian banking foundations. We found that some foundations view mission reports as regulatory obligations while others draw reports as strategic communication tools for community involvement and societal impact.

Research limits: Limitations include potential variances in communication practices among smaller foundations, not included in the analysis, and a constrained stakeholder perspective.

Practical implications: Our findings can guide efforts in strategic communication practices of nonprofit organisations, offering insights into enhancing the transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity of mission reports.

Originality of the paper: This paper pioneers the use of advanced textual analysis methods to examine the mission reports of Italian banking foundations. By doing so, it uncovers distinct communicative approaches and provides a comprehensive framework for enhancing transparency and strategic communication in social accountability reporting, thus offering new insights into the intersection of regulatory compliance and community engagement.

Keywords: banking foundations; mission reports; nonprofit organisations; communication strategies; natural language processing; lexical correspondence analysis

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organisations play unique roles in modern society (Gee *et al.*, 2023), fulfilling various social needs by providing suitable products and services with proper quality and quantity (Steinberg, 2006). In this vein, the Italian context has historically been characterised by a relevant role embodied by banking foundations in the third sector (Barletta and Demarie, 2001). These nonprofit organisations operating within the Italian financial landscape have undergone significant changes in recent years (Moschella, 2016). As crucial actors in philanthropy and social investment, Italian banking foundations have substantial influence on the economic and societal well-being of many Italian territories (Baroli *et al.*, 2013). Their multifaceted activities, encompassing a spectrum of initiatives that range from cultural promotion to community development, are underpinned by a common objective: the betterment of society. In such a context, mission reports are emerging as vital instruments for strategically communicating the foundations' purpose, values, and socio-economic contributions to an extensive cohort of stakeholders (Braun *et al.*, 2012; Mato-Santiso *et al.*, 2021).

Despite recent scholarly attention to nonprofit organisations, including a special issue in the *Strategic Management Journal* (Cabral *et al.* 2019), our understanding of many aspects of nonprofit organisations remains limited.

This paper explores social accountability reporting documents within the context of Italian banking foundations, particularly those with assets surpassing the threshold of one billion euros. The aim is to clarify the intricate dimensions of their strategic communicative practices through mission reports, which have emerged as the most common social accountability document among Italian banking foundations.

The underlying reason for this research is that while documents produced by nonprofit organisations—ranging from financial statements to mission reports—have traditionally served as financial instruments detailing resource allocation and expenditure, their strategic communicative role has recently gained paramount significance. Nowadays, these documents are transcending the scope of mere compliance purpose documents, assuming the role of strategic communicative tools through which banking foundations, as relevant third-sector actors, can articulate their objectives, achievements, and societal impacts. If thoughtfully and strategically composed, mission reports function as very effective instruments for engaging existing stakeholders and potentially attracting new investments, both essential elements in the sustainability and growth of these foundations.

Since the academic debate about these critical matters is rather scant, our research aims to address this gap by analysing major banking foundations' financial statements and mission reports to uncover their communicative strategies, answering an important question: How can nonprofit organisations leverage their annual reports for strategic communication purposes?

By analysing trends and areas for improvement, our study offers valuable insights to enhance the construction and use of these documents. After a literature review on banking foundations and their communication strategies, we provide a theoretical framework for their mission reports. We then introduce our methodology and discuss the results in a dedicated section. Finally, in the last section, we summarise the significance of our research for banking foundations, policymakers, and scholars in relevant fields, highlighting our research's limitations and future development.

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Crafting clarity: a textual
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mission reports

2. Background and literature review

2.1 *The context of banking foundations*

Banking foundations represent a significant sector within the Italian nonprofit landscape, functioning as powerful economic entities due to their substantial financial resources and autonomous governance. Their ability to mobilise resources and engage in local economic development positions them uniquely within the broader framework of nonprofit organisations (Barbetta and Maggio, 2008; Barbetta, 2013).

Banking foundations manage vast assets and pivotally influence the nonprofit sector, providing essential funding for various social and cultural initiatives (Miglietta, 2021; ACRI, 2023).

Regulated by legislation¹ to focus on social utility and local economic development, banking foundations must, in fact, allocate surplus funds to reserves and institutional activities. In 2022, they invested €962.2 million in various sectors, notably arts and culture, volunteering, research, education, local development, and social assistance (ACRI, 2023). Their extensive financial contributions make them vital to local development, as they enhance cultural preservation, research, education, and social welfare.

The considerable economic and social impact of banking foundations makes them an intriguing subject for academic study, especially in terms of their strategic communication and accountability practices. This is particularly relevant in Italy, where these foundations are financial powerhouses and key players in mitigating market failures and supplementing the limitations of public welfare systems (Levander, 2010; Perrini *et al.*, 2010). Their collaboration with local governments and nonprofits highlights the importance of transparent and effective communication to maximise their contributions to society and foster synergy among community actors (Bodega *et al.*, 2009). They must strategically communicate their impact and engage stakeholders to ensure ongoing support and effectiveness (Modina, 2006).

On the other hand, banking foundations face particular challenges as well. They must balance the need to maintain their financial sustainability with the obligation to allocate funds for public benefit. The governance of these foundations is also critical, as it influences their efficiency and effectiveness in fulfilling their mission (Leardini *et al.* 2014).

¹ Law no. 461 of 1998 and the subsequent legislative decree no. 153 of 1999, then expanded with Article 11 of Law 28 December 2001, n. 448.

Despite these challenges, banking foundations, being at the forefront in grasping the possible market failures of funded subjects, are in an ideal position to design innovative solutions to support cultural and social entrepreneurship in coordination with other local stakeholders. Cooperation with stakeholders is, in fact, a key aspect of their work. Banking foundations often collaborate with local governments, nonprofit organisations, and other entities to maximise the impact of their interventions. This collaboration not only enhances the effectiveness of their projects but also promotes synergy among different actors in the local development process (Segre *et al.* 2015).

2.2 Communication strategies of banking foundation and the strategic role of their mission reports

Banking foundations are entrusted with various responsibilities, including creating and presenting financial statements, mission reports, and other documents that communicate their activities to stakeholders. Although the primary motivation for producing these documents stems from legislative mandates, such as Article 9 of Legislative Decree 112/17, their significance extends beyond mere compliance. Industry practitioners and scholars argue that these reports are instrumental in establishing competitive advantages by defining strategic direction and enhancing organisational image (Peyrefitte, 2012).

In a competitive environment where nonprofit organisations (NPOs) are under pressure to improve social performance and contribute to societal welfare, the strategic communication of mission reports has become crucial. Another reason behind the centrality of mission reports lies in the increasing emphasis on sustainability within the communication strategies of nonprofit organisations. Over the last decades, the integration of sustainable practices into strategic communication proved to reflect the growing societal demand for transparency, accountability, and environmental responsibility (Caputo *et al.*, 2021).

Strategic communication scholarship indicates that the reputational capital of nonprofits, like banking foundations, enhances volunteer and employee acquisition and retention (Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014; Schloderer *et al.*, 2014) and fosters synergistic opportunities with governmental and for-profit entities (Peng *et al.*, 2019; Vafeiadis *et al.*, 2021). For banking foundations, which are key actors in the nonprofit sector, maintaining a good reputation is vital for securing social support to better address market failures and fulfil their mission. Additionally, by adopting and communicating sustainable practices, banking foundations can position themselves as leaders in the nonprofit sector. This leadership can inspire other organisations to follow suit, thereby amplifying the overall impact on sustainable development (Gazzola *et al.*, 2017).

The literature emphasises that banking foundations face a delicate balance between legal obligations in mission planning and the need for engaging in transparent communication. As recognised (Swift, 2001; Morsing and Schultz, 2006), communication is essential for building strong stakeholder relationships and ensuring accountability. This is particularly

significant for foundations, as transparency in governance and distribution of contributions influences relationships with territorial stakeholders (Ricciuti and Calò, 2016; Moggi *et al.*, 2015).

For nonprofit organisations like banking foundations, the focus extends beyond shareholders to reach all stakeholders involved in their operations (Mato-Santiso *et al.*, 2021). To address this broader focus, foundations implement systematic territorial listening strategies, such as surveys and events, to gather stakeholder input and ensure alignment with community needs (Miglietta and Quaglia, 2012).

In this framework, mission reports can serve as potent tools for strategic communication, demonstrating transparency and accountability while engaging stakeholders effectively. Effective mission reports reflect financial accountability and serve as strategic tools for competitive positioning and stakeholder engagement, enhancing the foundations' role in local development (Braun *et al.*, 2012).

Scholars have long studied the phenomenon of social accountability reports, highlighting their strategic management role in improving external communication and engaging stakeholders (Alegre *et al.*, 2018). Foundations must demonstrate their effectiveness through these reports, which contribute to transparency, accountability, and community legitimacy (Miglietta and Quaglia, 2014; Moggi *et al.*, 2015).

Despite these empirical findings and although academic literature and industry studies have partly highlighted the strategic role of communication for banking foundations (Pizzichini, 2020) as well as the importance of tools like the mission reports for these communication activities (Secchi, 2006; Moggi *et al.*, 2015), to date, this topic has been little explored regarding the specificities and contents of these communication activities.

In particular, there is a lack of studies that delve into whether and how foundations adopt different approaches to communication if key communicative areas emerge, and if the aspects already mentioned related to transparency and adherence to the needs and involvement of the reference communities emerge as communicative solid themes.

In light of these considerations, the objective of our study is to delve into the communication strategies of banking foundations and the key themes of this communication, looking at their mission budgets. In particular, our study aims to scrutinise the communicative aspects of these documents and unearth their fundamental characteristics in order to (i) shed light on prevalent trends, (ii) discern potential directives to write them effectively, (iii) identify differences in approaches/contents in the communication strategies of banking foundations.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Data source

Considering our research aim, we focused on the mission reports of the main Italian banking foundations. Italy was chosen as the context for this analysis due to its unique and well-established network of

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banking foundations, which play a critical role in social investment and local economic development. These foundations have a long history of regulatory frameworks and practices that offer a rich field for studying strategic communication and social accountability in the wider world of nonprofit organisations. Our sample included nine major Italian banking foundations, namely those with assets surpassing the threshold of one billion euros, thus ensuring the representation of prominent philanthropic actors. We reviewed the most recent mission reports available² at the time the paper was drafted, whenever presented as standalone documents and their financial statements, in cases where the foundations presented mission reports as a section within the comprehensive financial document. The decision to analyse the most recent documents available was meant to capture the current trends and strategies in the foundations' communication practices.

For our analysis, we scrutinised various aspects of the documents and the banking foundations themselves, recognising distinctive elements. First, we discerned whether each banking foundation presented its mission report as a dedicated document or a section within its broader financial reports. Secondly, we analysed the vocabulary employed within the reports, as well as the overarching purpose (e.g. having a reporting or a more promotional nature) to infer the intended audience. Such distinctions were crucial in understanding each foundation's structural and communicative approach and the primary intent behind producing these documents. Furthermore, the analysis aimed to verify if reports had elements such as KPIs or infographics capable of showing and conveying complex information effectively and transparently through visual aids and quantifiable metrics.

To complement our analysis, we also incorporated the adoption levels identified by Moggi *et al.* (2015), who highlighted four distinct levels of adoption based on the types of reporting encountered in their analysis of banking foundations' mission reports, namely:

- The law level essentially complies with the minimum legal requirements and employs simple methods such as tables to provide summaries, primarily to fulfil legal obligations.
- The simplified ACRI model, which is a simplified version of the model proposed by ACRI in 2004, draws inspiration from it but does not encompass all three sections proposed (identity, employment equity, and institutional activities).
- ACRI model, which adheres to the model rigorously, utilises all three main sections and often includes subsections that delve into greater detail.
- Expanded ACRI model, which aligns with the ACRI model and includes supplementary information by considering a broader array of stakeholders, extending beyond primary stakeholders to encompass other relevant groups.

In addition to examining mission reports, our analysis extended to the banking foundations' characteristics as well. Specifically, we scrutinised the sectors of intervention defined by the Law to comprehensively

² Documents referred to 2021 and 2022.

understand the foundations’ philanthropic priorities. Furthermore, we explored the reference territory and geographical scale of their interventions. Specifically, the geographical location was divided into North West (“N.W.”), North East (“N.E.”), and Centre (“C”). In contrast, the scale of intervention, which identifies how widespread the foundations’ interventions are across the territory, has been divided into National (“Nat”), Regional (“Reg”) and Local (“Loc”). This facet of our analysis aimed to discern any commonalities among the diverse foundations under study to identify potential patterns or clusters that could shed light on geographic variations. Table 1 summarises such elements.

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Tab. 1: Comparative analysis of banking foundations’ characteristics*

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION									
Dedicated document	X	X	X			X		X	
Part of financial statement (% of pages dedicated to mission report)				31%	35%		16%		42%
Meant for the general public	X	X	X			X		X	
Traditional chars (bars, pies)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Infographics and other KPIs	X	X	X		X		X		
Adoption level	4	3	3	2	3	4	2	4	2
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOUNDATION									
Geographical location	N.E.	N.W.	N.W.	C	C	N.E.	N.W.	N.W.	C
Scale of intervention	Reg.	Nat.	Loc.	Reg.	Loc.	Nat.	Reg.	Nat.	Reg.
Areas of intervention	6	12	6	9	9	9	7	11	5

Source: own elaboration. * x indicates where the variable is present.

This primary analysis was instrumental in decoding the foundations’ communication strategies, thematic priorities, and the accessibility of their information dissemination based on its weights. It also allowed us to delve into the broader communicative context adopted by the banking foundations, shedding light on the strategic objectives that characterised them. Furthermore, it provided the foundation for our detailed exploration, guiding the development of our analytical framework and the selection of relevant tools for quantitative analysis. Specifically, we used the open-source software R for Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, which will be discussed further in the next section.

3.2 From Textual Analysis to NLP

Textual analysis is the systematic procedure of extracting relevant information from written or verbal material. This method has been used throughout history to investigate a diverse range of subjects, such as history, literature, and social science. In recent years, there has been a notable advancement in the field of textual analysis, primarily attributed to the emergence of novel computer-based methodologies.

The discipline of NLP pertains to studying the interface between computers and human language within computer science. NLP system can

comprehend and analyse human language through various methodologies.

NLP and textual analysis are intricately interconnected disciplines. The first one frequently depends on textual analysis methodologies to extract information from written text. On the other hand, utilising NLP techniques can augment textual analysis systems by facilitating a comprehensive comprehension of the contextual nuances and semantic implications inherent in the text under scrutiny.

The usual operations for applying the language rules framework have been based on a collection of texts called corpus. Texts can be considered as a series of individual characters, necessitating a multistage procedure to convert unorganised data into organised data.

Although we did not find previous research applying textual analysis to mission reports with a focus on strategic communication, this methodology has been explored in finance studies, such as climate-related bank reporting (Araujo *et al.*, 2023; Yu *et al.*, 2024).

Therefore, the banking foundations' reports have been processed and divided into tokens (individual strings) by parsing and tokenising. Spaces and punctuation marks separate these tokens. The tokens are representative of the vocabulary employed inside the papers. The specific approach achieved by tokenisation is well recognised as the bag-of-words model (Salton and Buckley, 1988).

In this approach, each report is regarded as a multi-set of its tokens, with grammatical and syntactical functions being disregarded while preserving the multiplicity of the tokens. In general, linguistic units are organised into a distinct set of entries, referred to as types, and their respective frequencies of occurrence within a given collection. This compilation of types and frequencies is the vocabulary. Following the NLP approach, we have successfully decomposed the documents into their fundamental constituents. This deliberate reduction of language variability serves the purpose of mitigating potential sources of interference and enhancing the overall efficacy of subsequent analytical procedures. Specifically, we standardised the spelling of several tokens, such as multi-words with and without hyphens, and reverted each inflected word to its canonical form. This involved converting nouns and adjectives from plural to singular and verbs to their infinitive form. In addition, we operationalised the collocations by identifying the pair of words that exhibited the greatest frequency of co-occurrence (e.g. *contributo per il sostegno* = *contributo_sostegno*). Other rules, belonging to the part of speech approach have been applied.

The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) has been employed to evaluate the lexical diversity of the BF corpus (Gabrielatos *et al.*, 2011). The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) is a linguistic statistic employed for evaluating the lexical diversity of a given text. The analysis offers valuable perspectives on the diversity and abundance of lexicon by juxtaposing the quantity of distinct words (types) with the overall amount of words (tokens) in a certain text or collection of texts. The higher the percentage value the greater is the variety of vocabulary used in a text and conversely the lower percentage indicates a poor lexical level.

After completing the pre-processing stage, a collocation analysis to investigate the probabilistic associations between specific word pairs to shed more light on the recurrent linguistic patterns within the corpus has been conducted to understand the context (Lin, 2023).

A further step was the computation of the matrix called Document Terms Matrix (DTM). The DTM is a tabular representation in which each row corresponds to a document, and each column corresponds to a distinct term (word or phrase) found inside the corpus. The cells contain numerical values, often representing the frequency of each term in the corresponding document, in our case the cells contain TF-IDF values.

The availability of the DTM enables the identification of latent subjects present in the BF reports using the Latent Dirichlet Analysis (LDA) technique. LDA models provide the capability to deduce the latent topics that exist inside a corpus of texts (Blei *et al.* 2003; Grimmer, 2010; Wang and Blei, 2011). The fundamental rationale is to the idea of entities as probability distributions across a designated collection of linguistic units, specifically words, that align with the lexicon. The selection of these terms is intended to convey semantic representations of significant and intelligible topics for discussion. This phenomenon is because topic models assign a mixture of themes to each text while also considering the contribution of individual words within a document towards the specification of reports. The terms and topics LDA identifies can be used in the LCA - Lexical Correspondence Analysis (Lebart *et al.* 1997). LCA is a statistical technique employed to examine the associations between words and documents in a multivariate context. This is a form of correspondence analysis, which is a widely used technique for analysing contingency tables. The words and documents are spatially arranged on the map according to their similarity. In the cartographic representation, words that frequently co-occur within documents are positioned in closer proximity, whilst words that exhibit infrequent associations are situated at greater distances from one another.

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4. Results

4.1 NLP and LCA results

The eight banking foundations reports under examination have been transformed into a corpus and underwent pre-processing³. The corpus presents a total of 57.381 distinct types with 482.642 tokens. This highlights a very low value of TTR index equal to 0.119 (Table 2). We can thus generalise the technical nature of the reports, characterised by a repetitive set of terms. However, findings also suggest a potential clustering based on lexical richness, with only two reports (Foundation B and C) differing in lexical variety, implying that there needs to be a shared writing format among these foundations.

³ The foundation I was excluded for technical aspects.

Tab. 2: TTR index

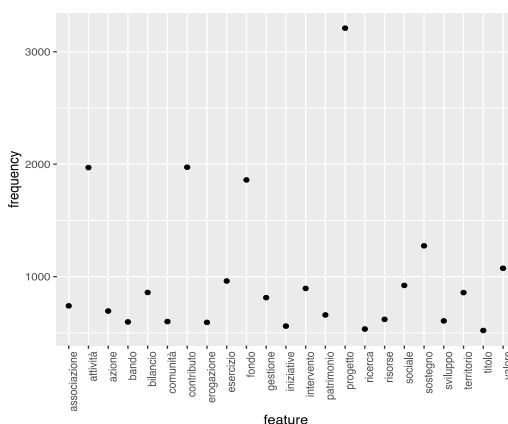
Text	Types	Tokens	TTR index
Foundation A	6137	35968	0.171
Foundation B	2727	13090	0.208
Foundation C	4156	19358	0.215
Foundation D	9837	79619	0.124
Foundation E	11860	139815	0.085
Foundation F	5298	37939	0.140
Foundation G	9996	96751	0.103
Foundation H	7370	60102	0.123
Total	57381	482642	0.119

Source: own elaboration

After the pretreatment sequence of operation, we identified the 25 most frequently occurring words in the mission and operating reports. The need to analyse the most frequently occurring words arises from the need to discern prevalent themes and emphasise critical focal points in the communicative strategies employed by these institutions.

As shown in Figure 1, most of these words exhibited repetitions ranging from 500 to 1000 occurrences. Among these recurrent terms, “valore” (value) appeared with unsurprising frequency, tallying slightly more than 1000 repetitions. Similarly, “sostegno” (support) emerged approximately 1300 times, while “fondo” (fund), “contributo” (contribution), and “attività” (activities) featured prominently, each with an unsurprising frequency of nearly 2000 repetitions. However, the most remarkable observation from this analysis was the resounding prominence of the word “progetto” (project), which unsurprisingly overshadowed all other terms. This word appeared in the mission report documents an astounding 3000 times, underscoring the central role of project-based initiatives within the purview of Italian banking foundations.

Fig. 1: Most frequent words



Source: own elaboration

While perhaps expected, these findings underscore the thematic emphasis placed on values, support, contributions, activities, and, above all, project-centric endeavours within the mission reports of these foundations.

Subsequently, Table 3 presents linguistic patterns and recurrent themes that provide insights into these institutions' communications' core concepts and focal points based on the collocation analysis. The first finding worth mentioning is that the analysis of the bigrams⁴ Shows a trend on technical topics. Moreover, these results further confirm the frequency analysis: the collocation "Contributo Sostegno" (Contribution Support) emerges as the most prevalent, found 847 times within the sample. This collocation underscores the foundations' consistent emphasis on providing financial contributions as a means of offering essential support. It reaffirms the symbiotic relationship between financial contributions and support within the foundations' mission narratives, an unsurprising but pivotal finding given their philanthropic nature. Similarly, "Sostegno Progetto" (Support Project) follows closely with 745 occurrences. This collocation underscores the foundations' dedication to supporting a diverse array of projects, portraying their commitment to concrete, impactful actions as a key facet of their mission. Moving on, other collocations present a significantly lower amount of occurrences. The third one in fact, is "Strumenti Finanziari" (Financial Instruments), appearing 267 times. This term's prominence suggests that discussions surrounding financial instruments are significant in the foundations' mission report narratives. The substantial count and a relatively high lambda value underscores the foundations' consistent reference to financial instruments, signalling their commitment to financial transparency.

Then, excluding collocations such as "Bilancio Missione" (Mission Report), "Consiglio Amministrazione" (Board of Directors), "Cassa Risparmio" (Savings Bank) and "Terzo Settore" (Third Sector), which do not yield substantial or distinctive insights, we can find two relevant collocations. Both "Associazione Culturale" (Cultural Association) and "Beni Culturali" (Cultural Heritage), mentioned conjointly 132 times and 111 times, respectively, highlight in fact, the foundations' active engagement in cultural preservation and promotion.

Tab. 3: Probability of associations between words

Bigrams	Count	Z	Bigrams	Count	Z
Contributo Sostegno	847	9.085	Beni Culturali	111	4.628
Sostegno Progetto	745	8.127	Associazione Culturale	132	4.619
Strumenti Finanziari	267	6.214	Credito Imposta	107	4.503
Bilancio Missione	232	5.556	Erogazione Deliberate	135	4.493
Valore Mercato	181	5.106	Conto Economico	93	4.416
Consiglio Amministrazione	153	5.101	Protezione Civile	102	4.408
Cassa Risparmio	153	5.073	Terzo Settore	118	4.384
Valore Bilancio	188	4.858	Immobilizzazioni Finanziarie	109	4.303

Source: own elaboration

⁴ Bigrams are a sequence of two adjacent elements or items in a dataset. In the case of text, bigrams refer to pairs of consecutive words in a body of text.

The application of LDA has identified three topics (Table 4). The activities pursued by the banking foundations, resource distribution, and community projects seem to be the main focus of Topic 1. Terms like “progetto” (project) and “attività” (activity) imply that the emphasis is on presenting and exploring the many initiatives and activities that these foundations carry out. The word “risorse” (resources) may suggest conversations on the best way to distribute funds to support such projects. The terms “territorio” (territory) and “comunità” (community) suggest that these projects are likely intended to support local communities and territories, which reflects the foundations’ commitment to relationships with the community.

Topic 2 revolves around the concept of contributions and support the banking foundations provide to various associations and activities. Specifically, the word “contributo” (contribution) may emphasise the foundations’ tangible or monetary contributions. “Sostegno” (support) emphasises how actively they assist various associations and their endeavours. Moreover, the terms “progetto” (project) and “attività” (activity) may refer to certain foundation-funded programs or initiatives. Hence, this topic seems to highlight the foundations’ important role in supporting and promoting various organisations and initiatives.

Lastly, Topic 3 is closely related to the financial aspects of the banking foundations’ operations. The term “fondo” (fund) can apply to managing finances or financial resources. “Valore” (value) might emphasise evaluating the importance or worth of the foundations’ operations. Lastly, the terms “esercizio” (financial year) and “bilancio” (financial statement) further confirm that some of the analysed documents are focused on financial performance and reporting.

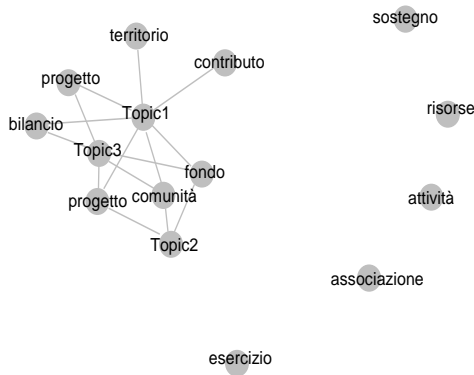
Tab. 4: Terms(Ti) and topics(tj)

Ti	tj		
	1	2	3
[1,]	progetto	contributo	fondo
[2,]	attività	progetto	valore
[3,]	risorse	sostegno	attività
[4,]	comunità	associazione	esercizio
[5,]	territorio	attività	bilancio

Source: own elaboration

The relationship between the topics can be shown in Figure 2 where “project” is the most frequent term and the most central word, and it characterised the first topic.

Fig. 2: Networks and terms



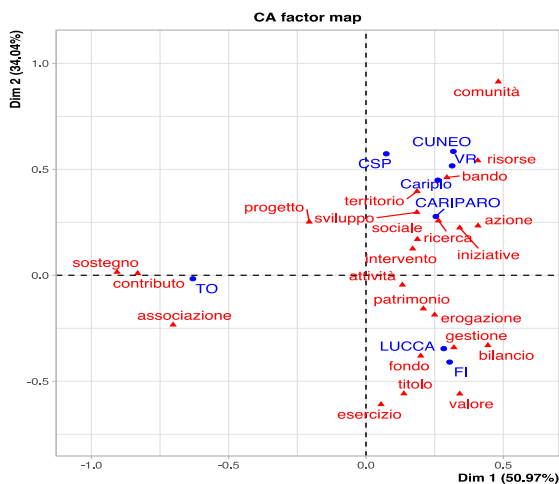
Source: own elaboration

The analysis continued with a CA Factor Map Analysis (Figure 3) that highlights the positioning of the most frequently occurring terms within mission reports and the corresponding foundations. Notably, this analytical approach explains approximately 85% of the overall variability in the data. The horizontal axis on the factor map represents the economic dimension, reflecting the financial aspects of the mission reports. In contrast, the vertical axis signifies the ethical dimension, extending from financial matters to societal impact.

The intersection of these axes discerns three distinct groups of Italian banking foundations, each marked by its unique communicative focus, namely:

- Economically Oriented Foundations;
- Financially Focused Foundations;
- Socially Engaged Foundations.

Fig. 3: CA Factor Map



Source: own elaboration

Foundation G predominantly characterises the first group (economically oriented), and strongly orients its communication toward economic aspects. This strategic emphasis aligns with a more traditional financial reporting approach, underscoring the foundations' dedication to conveying their fiscal activities and financial performance as central pillars of their mission narratives. Similarly, the second group (financially focused), composed of foundations D and E, exhibits a heightened level of attention to financial matters. The foundations within this group oriented their communication towards a distinct emphasis on financial aspects, reflecting a dedicated commitment to fiscal transparency and stewardship.

On the other hand, the third group (socially engaged), which includes foundations A, B, C, F and H manifests an inclination toward terminology associated with societal concerns and impact. This group prioritises the inclusion of terms related to social responsibility and community engagement, highlighting a more holistic and socially conscious approach.

5. Discussion and implications

Our investigation has produced interesting findings that shed light on the mission report narratives of nonprofit organisations, analysing the largest Italian banking foundations' communication strategies. In order to give a thorough picture of these organisations' communicative practices, our investigation integrated an in-depth reading of the source documents and an analysis of the context in which banking foundations operate with a quantitative analysis of the contents produced to provide a comprehensive understanding of these institutions' communicative practices.

The analysis reveals a distinctive dichotomy, categorising the sample into two primary groups based on their approach to communicating their mission statements (Braun *et al.*, 2012).

Foundations D, E, G and I form the first group, as they all seem to perceive the mission report mainly as a regulatory obligation, fulfilling it with a seemingly perfunctory disposition. In these cases, the mission report is incorporated as a mere section (sometimes occupying only a small percentage of pages compared to the total) within the broader financial statement. These foundations (with the exception of the Foundation I) are those explained by the CA Factor Map as "economically oriented" and "financially focused". Their documents predominantly serve a reporting compliance function, providing limited engagement with the general public. The formatting of these documents tends to be dense, offering little visual aids, key performance indicators, or infographics that could facilitate comprehension for the reader. Therefore, annual reports of these banking foundations are not easily readable, requiring specific reading skills and effort (Sattari *et al.*, 2011).

On the other hand, foundations A, B, C, F and H form the second group, which adopts a strongly different approach. First, these foundations have chosen to create dedicated mission reports that bear the clear imprint of communication specialists. Secondly, the terminology used strongly connects to community engagement and its societal impact, and one

could say that the contents are presented almost promotionally, relaying the accountability “for the public good” principle (Jones and Mucha, 2014). These aspects exhibit a concrete effort to engage and inform their internal stakeholders and the general public. Visual communication, including KPIs and infographics, is strategically leveraged within this group’s reports. Such practice is complemented by a formatting approach that offers more “room to breathe”, enhancing the document’s accessibility and readability. Furthermore, in some instances, sophisticated storytelling techniques are employed to effectively convey the banking foundations’ mission, values and projects undertaken, fostering a deeper connection with their audience.

Another element worth mentioning is that, regardless of this dichotomic orientation, the analysed documents exhibit a degree of diversity when it comes to the nomenclature employed for the chosen areas of intervention. Although the Law provided an official nomenclature for each sector to guide their philanthropic activities, some foundations took a certain degree of liberty in naming them, and in certain cases, they even grouped them to align with their own unique visions and local priorities. As a result, some foundations adopted the official and complete definition of the sectors they intervene in, while others preferred a more flexible approach.

Such variances highlight a certain level of inconsistency from a communicative point of view among the different foundations. However, they could be explained as a form of adaptability and responsiveness of these institutions in tailoring their initiatives to their communities’ specific needs and contexts. Differences in employed nomenclature could reflect a foundation’s strategic orientation and its emphasis on particular sectors that resonate most profoundly with its objectives and local stakeholder dynamics.

5.1 Outlining best practices

Based on the results discussed so far, several implications arise, which allow us to develop a framework for best practices that banking foundations should adopt to improve their strategic communication. Such practices could be summarised in three main areas, namely:

- Report structure and content enhancement
- Reporting integrity and clarity
- Stakeholder-centric communication

Regarding the type of document, banking foundations should, first of all, continue presenting mission reports as standalone documents, highlighting the evolving role of these reports in providing a comprehensive view of the foundations’ activities. Regarding contents, banking foundations should adopt what Moggi *et al.* (2015) defined as the “Expanded ACRI Model”. Specifically, mission reports should incorporate the three sections of the model proposed by ACRI in 2004 with supplementary information, such as defining stakeholder engagement strategies, outlining an impact assessment framework, explaining monitoring and evaluation criteria, and providing insights into the foundation’s long-term strategy. Moreover, the use of visual representations, in conjunction with quantifiable metrics and key performance indicators, could make the report more engaging

and accessible to stakeholders while at the same time conveying both quantitative and qualitative information.

Concerning the integrity and clarity of the report, a major goal for banking foundations is to guarantee their accountability (Moggi *et al.* 2015; Ricciuti and Calò, 2016). Hence, they should strive to improve transparency within mission reports by providing in-depth information about the foundation's identity, mission fulfilment, and impact on various stakeholders. Such efforts can offer a clearer and more transparent view of their activities, fostering trust and confidence. Among the different adjustments that can be made to achieve this result, a comparable nomenclature for areas of intervention stands out. Even if the diversity in nomenclature adopted testify to their adaptability and responsiveness, it also represents a challenge of comparability. A more standardised nomenclature, possibly the one already defined by Law, not only helps understand and compare the mission and impact of various foundations but also allows for meaningful cross-comparisons, enabling stakeholders to assess the relative contributions and priorities of different banking foundations more straightforwardly.

The recommended improvements for a more stakeholder-centric approach include customising mission reports based on the specific needs and expectations of banking foundations' main stakeholder groups. Hence, reports should emphasise the foundations' commitment to systematic and organised listening to the territory where they operate. Such efforts would showcase dedication to aligning activities with local needs. Furthermore, effective communication should emphasise the importance of balancing strategic, project-oriented efforts with community-focused support, demonstrating versatility and aligning with inclusivity and social responsibility values.

Lastly, it is worthwhile for banking foundations to consider evolving their mission reports towards a broader and more inclusive document, as discussed by Moggi *et al.* (2015). While mission reports are typically tailored to meet the expectations of institutional stakeholders only (Barrett, 2001; Fazzi, 2012), expanding their scope to encompass a more comprehensive array of stakeholders can bring significant benefits.

In conclusion, it is essential for banking foundations to understand how mission reports are not exclusively a regulatory obligation or an internal documentation exercise. On the contrary, it is a strategic tool capable of conferring a competitive advantage.

6. Concluding remarks and future research

Italian banking foundations are pivotal in cultural preservation, societal well-being, and local economic development. As the public sector shares this stage, an increasing number of nonprofit entities are increasingly actively engaged in local development initiatives. Effective communication strategies are essential for maximising their philanthropic impact in this dynamic context. Foundations should focus on transparent, engaging, user-friendly communication methods to cater to diverse

audiences. Building upon this understanding, the paper has dug into the communication practices of major Italian banking foundations through the lens of their mission reports in order to identify distinct groups, each marked by a unique communicative strategy.

The choice to analyse this particular kind of document finds justification in the fact that these reports, once primarily financial documents, have evolved into strategic communication tools that articulate the objectives, achievements, and societal impacts of these philanthropic entities.

Our analysis permitted us to identify distinct groups of banking foundations based on their approach to mission reporting: on the one hand, we found those characterised by an “economically oriented” and “financially focused” approach that perceive mission reports primarily as a regulatory requirement. On the other hand, we have foundations that use mission reports to emphasise community engagement and societal impact by making information accessible to internal stakeholders and the public.

Moreover, TTR analysis reveals an underlying technical nature of the documents, characterised by a repetitive set of terms. These terms are also frequently associated, as demonstrated by the collocation analysis. The application of Latent Dirichlet Allocation identified three distinct topics within mission reports that reinforce the foundations’ focus on initiatives and activities, financial contributions and support, and financial aspects, offering valuable insights into their mission narratives and priorities.

In our investigation into the strategic communication practices of banking foundations, we have unearthed a comprehensive framework for best practices. This framework presents a holistic approach to strategic communication, fostering transparency, adaptability, and accountability. By providing a broad set of recommendations across three different domains - which we identified as report structure and content enhancement, reporting integrity and clarity, and stakeholder-centric communication - our research equips Italian banking foundations with the tools to obtain a strategic advantage. Moreover, we advocate for a more inclusive approach, urging banking foundations to evolve their mission reports into broader documents serving various stakeholders.

Our findings contribute to the growing knowledge of social accountability reporting and offer valuable insights for banking foundations, policymakers, and scholars.

The identified dichotomy in communication strategies enhances theoretical understanding and suggests future research directions across nonprofit sectors and regions. Our findings also highlight the importance of transparency and stakeholder engagement for nonprofit legitimacy and effectiveness, adding to the literature on trust and accountability. Finally, our study also proposes best practices for mission reporting, bridging academic research with practical application and providing valuable insights for scholars and practitioners.

Despite these results, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The first limitation concerns the sample of foundations analysed, which is limited to the major ones in Italy. This potentially restricts the generalizability of the results to different cultural and legislative contexts or smaller foundations with different communication practices. Additionally,

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our analysis primarily focuses on linguistic and textual aspects, overlooking broader communication strategies that could offer a more comprehensive understanding of foundation practices. Furthermore, the temporal scope of the study is specific, neglecting potential changes in communication practices over time. Finally, our analysis may offer a limited perspective only from the entities developing communication activities - i.e., the foundations - overlooking the stakeholders' perspective to whom such communication is directed. A potential avenue for future research is, therefore, to collect data regarding readers' perceptions of mission reports.

Further research developments could also explore the communication practices of smaller foundations, uncovering similarities and differences for a broader understanding of the strategies employed by this type of entity. Additionally, other dimensions of communication, such as dissemination strategies, visual design, and accessibility features, could be included in future research endeavours.

Finally, further investigations could examine the policy implications of mission reporting practices and how regulators can promote more effective and transparent communication. Exploring the transition from traditional mission reports to broader social reports, often adopted by for-profit entities, presents an intriguing path for academics and professionals. This transition, characterised by a multi-stakeholder approach, allows banking foundations to integrate the best practices of both formats, further enhancing transparency and communication effectiveness.

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Linking strategic communication and sustainability reporting. Exploring corporate websites of Georgian Banks

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Abstract

Framing of the research: Corporate sustainability contributes to economic, social, and environmental pillars in consonance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This involves that corporate strategies and actions need to be aligned with the United Nations' SDGs, which are a global framework to address issues like poverty, inequality, and climate change by 2030. Sustainable businesses aim to meet these global objectives through responsible strategies that support economic, social, and environmental goals. Following this perspective, the study focuses on how companies adopt strategic communication approach to report their sustainability efforts through corporate websites.

Purpose of the paper: This paper analyses the existing link between strategic communication and CSR/Sustainability in the banking sector in an emerging country.

Methodology: The multiple case study applied for this research intends to analyse the companies' (two banks and two microfinance organizations) communication efforts regarding CSR and/or Sustainability. Strategic communication aspects of CSR are explored from the organizations' websites using a qualitative content analysis research approach.

Findings: Banks in Georgia invest heavily in CSR and Sustainability programs to demonstrate their social and ecological orientations. Special attention is devoted to education, charity, and ecological projects. However, the strategic communication lacks the comprehensiveness and coherence. The researched financial companies tend to communicate information on their websites about CSR programs and results without presenting information about the CSR process.

Research limits: The paper shows several limitations. It focussed on selected items to analyse the role of strategic communication in boosting CSR. Future research can be devoted to the cultural dimensions of strategic communication of CSR to different groups of stakeholders by analysing various communication channels.

Implications: Our results have implications for CSR and sustainability theory and practice. This research contributes to the literature by examining strategic communication aspects of CSR/sustainability reporting on corporate websites in the financial industry and by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities in this regard in emerging economies. Thus, managers and communication professionals should not only present a report on corporate websites but consider more long-term orientated strategic communication.

Originality of the paper: The CSR programs carried out by the analysed companies are considering their financial capacity and desire to enhance their public image, improve their reputation and attract investors. Accordingly, CSR and sustainability communication of finance companies in Georgia is significant not only

Key words: corporate social responsibility; strategic communication; banking sector; corporate website.

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic, long-term orientation of companies due to the growing awareness of global social and environmental concerns (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016; Gigauri *et al.*, 2023; Battisti *et al.*, 2023). Companies implementing CSR strategy choose social and/ or ecological issues they want to tackle and communicate their achievements effectively (Du *et al.*, 2010; Felix *et al.*, 2022; Emeka-okoli *et al.*, 2024). Presently, businesses are considered not only as social problem creators but also as problem-solvers. Moreover, CSR and Sustainability communication and reporting about successes are now viewed as a must for businesses to contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., ElAlfy *et al.*, 2020; Tsalis *et al.*, 2020; Martín-Cervantes and Valls Martínez, 2023; Panait *et al.*, 2021; 2023a; Wichaisri and Sopadang, 2017), and to simultaneously meet stakeholders' requirements. Communication is a critical factor of today's economic success due to its remarkable contribution to value creation (Zerfass, 2008).

The literature maintains that corporate sustainability aims at promoting economic, social, and environmental aspects simultaneously according to the guidelines of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) suggested by the United Nations and the Business Roundtable, where CEOs agreed to reorientate their businesses in order to respond to all stakeholders rather than solely seeking profit for their shareholders (Castañeda-Ayarza, 2022; Felix *et al.*, 2022; Dhanda and Shrotryia, 2021).

Thus, strategic corporate social responsibility addresses stakeholders' concerns while simultaneously deriving business benefits for companies through shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2018). To create shared values, organizations establish strong relations with critical stakeholders and communicate their efforts in following the economic, ecological, and social objectives (Robinson and Eilert, 2018).

Besides the strategic orientation of CSR in the banking organization, strategic communication of CSR should be researched. In particular, how banks adopt an appropriate strategic communication approach for communicating about their CSR /Sustainability efforts. CSR is interconnected with how it is communicated to create shared value, especially in the banking sector with a controversial reputation (Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Palazzo and Foroudi, 2024). Companies now understand that their survival and success depend on taking responsibility and proposing value to all stakeholders, which become a necessity under the umbrella concept of Sustainability and is no more "a luxury investment", or marketing (Castañeda-Ayarza, 2022). For this reason, companies increasingly are allocating resources to CSR projects dedicated to social and environmental

activities to embed responsible business practices and respond to the demand of socially and ecologically conscious stakeholders who in return would reward their corporate responsible behaviour (Du *et al.*, 2010). In addition, stakeholder relationships through CSR can be improved.

Falkheimer (2014) investigated the significance of strategic communication for modern organizations and proposed four arguments for organizational development, namely, “its relevance for organizational efficiency, image, identity and transparency”. Based on the conceptual research, the author considered strategic communication as a key management process and urged further empirical research (Falkheimer, 2014).

Previous studies show that a company’s reputation includes “product quality, innovation, investment value, people management and CSR” (Du *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, organizations can enhance their reputation through CSR communication (Du *et al.*, 2010). On the contrary, another empirical research conducted by Mochales and Blanch (2022) found that corporate communication has an insignificant influence on strategic CSR and on corporate performance.

Furthermore, digitization trends accelerated the use of corporate websites for strategically communicating with stakeholders about CSR. Georgiadou and Nickerson (2020) outline the effectiveness of corporate websites for CSR communication to inform stakeholders and obtain legitimacy as well as to derive benefits from sustainability and CSR activities. However, in emerging countries online CSR communication remains ignored and corporate websites are rarely considered effective strategic tools (Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020). For this reason, this study is devoted to strategic CSR communication by banks in Georgia (the country) to contribute to the knowledge body about emerging economies.

In recent years, Georgian companies have actively engaged in CSR and begun developing their CSR approaches to contribute to sustainable development (Gigauri, 2022). In their communication, Georgian companies highlight social and environmental activities they are involved in, without indicating their primary motivation in those issues or strategic links between their business and CSR projects. Scholars argue that for strategic reasons, companies need to establish the connection between CSR motives and their business and propose a model of CSR communication (Du *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, this study explores these relationships by evaluating corporate websites.

This research intends to fill the gap in the literature related to strategic communication issues of CSR/ Sustainability reports through corporate websites. While many studies focus on the content of sustainability reports (Martín-Cervantes and Valls Martínez, 2023; Panait *et al.*, 2023b; Tsalis *et al.*, 2020; Barkemeyer *et al.*, 2014), there's a lack of research on the effectiveness of various communication strategies employed on corporate websites to disseminate this information. Engaging audiences and conveying sustainability messages is crucial. Sustainability information presented on corporate websites satisfies the information needs of various stakeholders (Michaels and Grüning, 2018; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, website design elements may influence the engagement of audiences

(Lischka, 2023; Hetze and Winistörfer, 2016). Therefore, understanding the website communication strategies of CSR/Sustainability reports can provide valuable insights for researchers and professionals.

Furthermore, there is a need to examine the integration of sustainability communication within broader corporate communication strategies (Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020). The existing literature lacks studies related to how companies align their CSR and sustainability messaging on their websites with their overall brand identity, values, and reporting initiatives (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020; Mochales and Blanch, 2022). Consequently, exploring this integration can shed light on the coherence and credibility of communication efforts.

Thus, this research aims to address these gaps in the literature to advance our understanding of strategic communication issues related to CSR and sustainability reports on corporate websites in the developing country context. This will contribute to the development in the fields of strategic communication, CSR and sustainability and pave the way for future studies.

The banking and financial sector in Georgia try to apply more strategic approaches but still emphasize their philanthropic initiatives. As a developing country, Georgia lacks knowledge and experience in the CSR/Sustainability field, which would allow companies to focus on CSR projects from a strategic perspective. Another obstacle is the misconception that philanthropy is equated with CSR. Still, companies in the banking sector are adopting international standards for their annual reporting initiatives. Financial and non-financial reporting is also obliged by the law as well as by the pressure from stakeholders including foreign shareholders. Therefore, financial companies in Georgia strive to link their CSR strategies to SDGs and contribute to tackling challenges with education, environmental protection, and poverty.

Thus, this paper analyses the existing link between strategic communication and CSR/Sustainability in the banking sector in an emerging country. In this particular scenario, the paper shows the importance of investigating whether banks utilize their corporate websites to disseminate information about their social and environmental initiatives in a strategic way. Therefore, the paper addresses two main questions:

RQ1. How do banking companies and microfinance organizations in Georgia communicate CSR/ Sustainability orientation through corporate websites? And what are the main CSR/ Sustainability issues communicated by them?

RQ2. How visible is the strategic communication of CSR/ Sustainability projects on the corporate websites of banking (and microfinance) companies?

The multiple case study applied for this research intends to analyse the companies' (two banks and two microfinance organizations) communication efforts regarding CSR and/ or Sustainability. Strategic communication aspects of CSR are explored from the organizations' websites.

2. Literature Review

Strategic Communication and CSR

CSR is defined as the volunteer action of firms to take more responsibilities beyond the basic economic and legal obligations and behave ethically in their business activities (Sarkar and Searcy, 2016). In this respect, the primary goal of CSR communication is to inform stakeholders about CSR efforts and convince them about the legitimacy of such projects, hence gaining their support.

Communication trends have been shifted from a tactical to a strategic orientation (Argenti, 2017). CSR has been integrated into the corporate strategy and strategic objectives in companies of all sectors and sizes (e.g., Ben Youssef *et al.*, 2017; Michaels and Grüning, 2018; Vishwanathan *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, companies still tend to choose the strategic directions of CSR based on their size, industry, and stakeholder interests. For CSR to be implemented strategically, Mochales and Blanch (2022) propose four factors: Creating business opportunities, Relationship with stakeholders, Media strategy and communication, and Strengthening brand equity. Media strategy and corporate communications involve the development and implementation of a communication plan aiming at informing and engaging stakeholders including the society, which can be a part of stakeholder strategy (Mochales and Blanch, 2022).

Hallahan *et al.* (2007) define strategic communication as the deliberate communication of an organization, which is planned and implemented with the intention to accomplish its mission towards various internal and external stakeholders. Strategic communication aims at enhancing and shaping legitimacy among managers and employees as well as between companies and society (Falkheimer, 2014; Siano and Palazzo, 2015).

Zerfass (2008) defines strategic communication in terms of “all communication processes which contribute to the definition of tasks, [...] and which, in particular, contribute to the internal and external coordination of actions and to the clarification of interests defining the relation between companies and their specific stakeholders”. Through communication, companies inform and influence stakeholders, and hence, enhance their intangible assets (Zerfass, 2008).

Strategic communication is vital for organizational effectiveness and from the viewpoint of public opinion (Falkheimer, 2014). It involves a strategic management role and covers all communication efforts of the organization (Christensen *et al.*, 2008) as the communication process needs management support. It is a fundamental activity for organizations. Through communication, organizational factors and activities are accentuated (Gregory and Halff, 2013). Previous studies confirmed that strategic communication is viewed as a management asset and an important aspect of the strategic management process (Tench *et al.*, 2013; Zerfass *et al.*, 2012; Hamrefors, 2010).

Companies convey their sustainability focus to generate value for stakeholders and express their sustainability or corporate responsibility behaviour through their mission, vision, value statements, and strategy (Lee *et al.*, 2013). From the strategic management perspective, companies

should make decisions that increase their competitiveness and profit. For this reason, they need to analyse their internal and external environment, interpret trends and changes, and plan their reactions accordingly (Castañeda-Ayarza, 2022). Therefore, decision-making is based on the company's values, vision, and mission. Corporate strategies are guided by their values, while mission provides insight into the firm's competencies and abilities to its stakeholders and displays how it responds to external opportunities and requirements (Castañeda-Ayarza, 2022). Vision demonstrates to the stakeholders what the organization aims to accomplish. Thus, strategically considering, sustainability is integrated into the business model and intends to the economic, social, and environmental value creation (Castañeda-Ayarza, 2022; Zufall *et al.*, 2019; Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2018).

Theories behind CSR reporting and communication

The seminal stakeholder theory explains the necessity of CSR for the financial performance and long-term success of a firm (Freeman and Reed, 1983). The theory argues that CSR enables firms to improve their performance through the relationship with relevant stakeholders (Kumar and Tiwari, 2011; Cho *et al.*, 2019). Companies engaging in CSR activities are perceived by stakeholders as ethical and gain a better reputation, which increases brand equity and return on capital (Mochales and Blanch, 2022). Yet the different stakeholder groups have diverse interests causing conflict among them. Companies have to consider the diversity of stakeholder groups when planning communication strategies.

The social exchange theory suggests that consumers purchase products and services from companies and in return, companies implement CSR programs to strengthen the relations with stakeholder groups (Mochales and Blanch, 2022; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Legitimacy theory proposes that companies need a legitimacy as a 'social contract' to gain 'a license to operate' from society (Deegan, 2002). According to Deegan (2018), "Organizational legitimacy can be considered as a resource upon which many organizations are dependent for their survival". Consequently, business companies can only operate if they gain social acceptance (Hahn and Kühnen, 2013).

Signalling theory claims that companies 'signal' communication about their economic, social, and environmental performance to mitigate informational asymmetry and impress the market by enhancing image and reputation (Su *et al.*, 2016; Ruhnke and Gabriel, 2013). Business companies can assure their social legitimacy through signalling actions (Hahn and Kühnen, 2013) such as strategic communication of CSR.

Therefore, companies engaging in CSR can gain consumer loyalty, encourage positive word-of-mouth, sell more products, and even charge high prices, as well as foster new investments and attract talented employees (Du *et al.*, 2010). Studies confirm the effectiveness of CSR communication for strengthening corporate image (e.g., Panait *et al.*, 2021; 2023a; Gigauri, 2022; Gigauri *et al.*, 2023; Valls Martínez *et al.*, 2022; Verk *et al.*, 2021; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Andreu *et al.*, 2015; Korschun *et al.*, 2014). Scholars argue that by implementing CSR programs, companies make an

impression on stakeholders and gain their support expressed in increased sales, attracting gifted employees and more investments, improving corporate image and reputation, and enhancing relationships with various stakeholders (Du *et al.*, 2010). To achieve such favourable results, companies need to engage in strategic communication to disseminate their CSR efforts effectively among all stakeholders considering the interests of different groups (Du *et al.*, 2010). Jin *et al.* (2018) conducting 38 interviews with chief communications officers ascertained that successful communication should be honest, transparent, and ethical to meet stakeholders' expectations and hence, contribute to the corporate strategy. In this respect, strategic communication of CSR includes choosing message content, delivering it through suitable communication channels, and understanding the factors that have an impact on communication effectiveness (Du *et al.*, 2010). For this reason, both external stakeholders such as consumers and communities and internal stakeholders such as employees and shareholders need to become aware of the company's CSR initiatives to reap business benefits (Du *et al.*, 2010). Thus, an essential precondition for earning strategic benefits is raising awareness of various stakeholders towards CSR projects. In this context, strategically planned communication plays a pivotal role.

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Strategic Communication and CSR in Financial Organizations: focusing on stakeholders.

Strategic corporate social responsibility motivates financial organizations to communicate their CSR along with achieving business objectives and performance (Palazzo *et al.*, 2020). Corporate communication is significant for gaining stakeholders' support by informing them about a bank's performance related to economic, social, and environmental issues (Pérez and del Bosque, 2013).

Previous research analysing corporate websites to explore communication efforts of CSR found that banks pay less attention to strategic CSR communication on their websites and make less effort towards value creation (Palazzo *et al.*, 2020). A study of the corporate websites of banks in the United Arab Emirates found that the majority, n. 70%) of national banks disclose information about CSR projects but rather include limited information (Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020). Interestingly, state-owned banks are likely to disclose CSR information more comprehensively than commercial counterparts (Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020).

CSR communication not only aims to underline ethical and responsible behaviour but also to spread information on how companies avoid irresponsible behaviour (Barkemeyer *et al.*, 2014). As a response to the CSR communication effort, customers can respond with scepticism as they might perceive those messages as greenwashing or an attempt to make a false impression (Illia *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, delicately shaped strategic communication can yield results. Bartikowski and Berens (2021), exploring the consequences of CSR communication on consumer attitudes and buying intentions through the experiments, found "a positive main effect of positively framed CSR communication". This result is reinforced

by specific arguments that are included in the communication messages (Bartikowski and Berens, 2021).

Particularly service organizations need to strengthen their corporate brands as customers form their decisions based on intangible values which are created by communication (Falkheimer, 2014) including conveying information regarding sustainability and CSR activities of the company. The company's image or reputation shaped by communication determines how it is perceived by stakeholders and the public. Contemporary society faces uncertainties and amplifies individual choices, which determine how they interpret information from and about organizations (Bauman, 2013). Moreover, a participatory culture and technological progress stimulate collectiveness and enable consumers to communicate and share information through various sources before making a decision (Delwiche and Henderson, 2012). Comments and rumours spread effortlessly through the Internet affecting organizational reputation and consumer behaviour (Falkheimer, 2014). On the other hand, strategic communication can unite the stakeholder groups around values to support the company's vision and strategy (Falkheimer, 2014). Falkheimer (2014) demonstrates the relationship between communication focusing on values and culture, and organizational effectiveness and reputation.

Furthermore, Rensburg, de Beer and Coetzee (2008) show the strong association between stakeholder relationships and corporate reputation leading to corporate sustainability. The authors argue that strategic communication should aim at sharing meaning and creating understanding to develop stakeholder relationships. Thus, organizations using strategic communication can be labelled as sustainable as they meet social expectations by not only providing social, economic, ethical, and ecological value but also establishing relevant public relations (Rensburg *et al.*, 2008).

3. Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative case study method and content analysis technique to answer the research questions (Halkias *et al.*, 2022; Yin, 2018) and to analyse strategic communication of CSR of banks and microfinance organizations in Georgia.

In the first phase, data was collected from the websites (including reports on sustainability and CSR) of two largest banks (TBC, Bank of Georgia) and two leading microfinance organizations (MBC, Crystal).

A case study method is widely used for studies of CSR and sustainability issues of companies (e.g., Andayani, 2019) to investigate the banks' CSR disclosures on the Internet (e.g., Branco and Rodrigues, 2006; Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020) and companies' websites (e.g., Du and Vieira, 2012; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Panait *et al.*, 2023b). Corporate websites of banks are analysed by prior studies to investigate CSR communication (e.g., Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020).

The annual reports as well as corporate websites serve as a medium to disclose information. Since the website of a company is an accessible and

prominent communication channel, it ought to contain information about the CSR/ Sustainability activities of the company to inform its stakeholders (Du and Vieira, 2012).

For this study, a content analysis approach was applied as it is commonly used by scholars to examine corporate communication and CSR disclosure and reporting, including banks (e.g., Panait *et al.*, 2021; 2023a; Lischka, 2023; Felix *et al.*, 2022; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020; Ellerup-Nielsen and Thomsen, 2018; Liao *et al.*, 2017; Hetze and Winistörfer, 2016).

The banks and microfinance organizations in the sample are chosen due to their leading positions in the Georgian marketplace and due to their solid achievements in implementing CSR/ sustainability projects on the strategic level. They are the winners of the CSR award in Georgia “Meliora - Georgia’s Responsible Business Awards” in different years. The prestigious annual competition of responsible businesses in the country is organized by CSRDG to recognize outstanding CSR projects and organizations. Moreover, our sample included financial organizations with Georgian ownership and excluded the branches of foreign bank, as they either do not implement CSR or receive CSR programs from their headquarters. In Georgia, as a small, post-soviet country, with a population of 3.5 million people, around ten banks are operating. Our sample includes the biggest financial organizations that occupy leading positions in the implementation of CSR in the country.

This research has evaluated communication efforts on corporate websites, including mission, vision, strategy, CSR, and sustainability information. Every page at each website was examined in terms of its content navigated by various categories presented on the websites.

In the second phase, to sustain the content analysis approach, an initial exploratory study was conducted to address specific research questions. This research aims to bridge the existing gap in this field by adopting the procedures outlined by Churchill (1979) to examine the relationship between CSR and strategic communication in the selected scenario. The exploratory analysis undertaken in this area serves the following purposes: 1) to acquire an in-depth understanding of the subject matter, 2) to assess current practices to determine the relevance of the proposed research, and 3) to sustain content analysis (Churchill, 1979). According to Churchill (1979), these techniques generate a sufficient number of items and represent constructs through exploration, literature search and analysis. This research employs the aforementioned approaches to evaluate the selected constructs. Qualitative data, primarily gathered through the websites, were utilized to sustain the content analysis process (Churchill, 1979).

Content analysis process

The initial step in the qualitative data analysis involved generating open codes. These open codes were then interpreted and categorized into broader concepts before key categories emerged. The process of open coding began with a line-by-line analysis of the text from the corporate websites’ sections, highlighting passages that addressed and coded the main topics of the study. The texts were meticulously read twice to identify

relevant patterns highlighted in previous literature. Each sentence was compared to the preceding sentences to note variations, differences, and similarities. Identical or similar sentences were coded uniformly, while different sentences were assigned new codes. The primary objective of open coding is to identify themes in the text that are either similar to or different from those in related literature. After completing open coding, the researcher made additional notes and remarks for further rigorous examination, which contributed to the development of axial codes.

The second phase of data analysis was axial coding, which seeks to define the connections and contrasts between core categories and subcategories to recognize patterns within the text. The axial coding technique involves continuous comparison, focusing on variations and similarities in the previously identified open codes. The open codes were compared with one another to produce axial codes. This method enables the researcher to construct new axial codes or modify and combine existing ones.

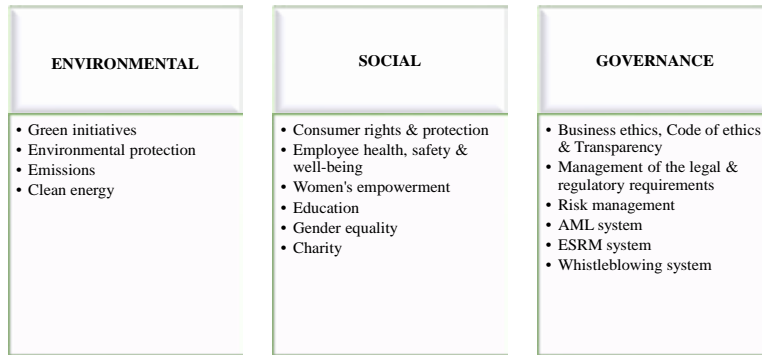
The final coding process is selective coding, which aims to integrate the emerging theory. Selective coding is the most complex stage in grounded theory analysis. The researchers employed three additional methods alongside traditional analytical coding: 1) reviewing the research questions as a general guideline; 2) re-examining the open and raw codes when evaluating axial codes; and 3) discussing code compatibility and relationships with experts and supervisors.

4. Findings

The studied banks and microfinance organizations (MFOs) excel in the country in their social involvement and environmental performance. They gained CSR awards in different years for their accomplishments. It is expected that the companies communicate sustainability strategically and disclose nonfinancial performance on how they manage their economic, social, and environmental footprints. The websites of the studied companies include transparent communication regarding Customer Protection, Cyber Security, and other relevant information for stakeholders.

The content of the websites of Georgian financial institutions has different sections that contain information about their CSR and Sustainability activities, such as: “Sustainability”, “CSR”, “Annual Report”. The webpages reveal the important areas of environmental, social and governance in which companies are engaging to increase the value for stakeholders (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: CSR areas of the financial organization of Georgia



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Source: Authors' elaboration based on companies' websites

It is noteworthy that the corporate websites include information in both - Georgian and English languages. Yet the communication lacks plain language and is presented in a more formal way. More information is included in reports (uploaded documents) rather than on the website.

The target audience of the analysed websites' communication strategy seems to be primary investors and then consumers. Consequently, communication aims at increasing the trust of customers and investors, as well as brand image and reputation.

CSR/ Sustainability communication on corporate websites of Georgian banks

The banking companies present general information on the CSR projects on their websites followed by CSR/ Sustainability reports prepared by international standards such as GRI. The Sustainability /CSR reports provide thorough information and accomplishments in the chosen areas.

The corporate websites include the category "Reports" which covers the subcategories and themes such as Corporate Governance, Financial Reports, Annual Reports, CSR Reports, and Sustainable Reports. However, one of them - Bank of Georgia does not present its CSR report on its website. Whereas another bank - TBC conveys annual CSR reports and Sustainability reports separately.

All the analysed web pages of the organizations assure stakeholders about their corporate governance standards, principles, and policies. The Code of Ethics is also accessible on the webpage. In addition, there is communication about public relations, partners, risk management, employee protection, and diversity and inclusion policy. Following the content analysis process, this research has identified the following themes that are communicated on the websites: CSR reports, Sustainability reports, Annual reports, Code of Ethics, Cyber security policy, Risk management, Corporate governance, Consumer protection policy, Environmental protection strategy, Social programs, and Charity activities.

The websites encompass corporate colours, create business image, and use formal language to impress investors and evoke trust while strengthening reputation among customers and other stakeholders.

The communication messages aim to convey responsibility, transparency, innovativeness, and partnership. For example: “Bank of Georgia’s mission is to support the customers, investors, employees, and public by professionalism, commitment, and constant innovation to create a successful future together.”

The studied companies promote sustainable business and corporate responsibility in the country, which is also mentioned in their communication messages. For instance, TBC stated to be “a technology driven company, which exists for its users, knows them and cares for them.” In the latest Sustainability Report, they claim: “Our strategy directs us to be a commendable company by raising awareness and establishing environmental, social and governance (ESG) values in the country and the broader region”.

This research has found that CSR strategy does not fully resonates to the mission of companies. For example, TBC Bank emphasizes culture, innovativeness and technologies, and Bank of Georgia highlights its contribution to customers and the country. The goals of the Bank include words such as “social needs”, “values”, and “responsibility” echoing its CSR strategy.

CSR/ Sustainability communication on corporate websites of Georgian microfinance organizations

The websites of the microfinance organizations highlight the importance of CSR, ethics, values, and sustainable development. Their web pages include messages that corporate responsibility is integrated into their business models and strategy. Such communication helps create value for stakeholders and increase trust. The websites clearly indicate how the companies link their CSR strategy to SDGs. The communication outlines the partners such as UN, GRI, as well as the CSR awards, they have received. The companies seem to attempt to communicate their CSR strategy and social and environmental projects in harmony with corporate missions and goals. This is indicated by Crystal’s strategy statement: “We strive to equally address the needs of our stakeholders, the planet we live on, and the financial soundness of our customers, without no individual factor compromising the other two”.

The communication on the MBC’s website puts the emphasis on the strategic approach of CSR: “Corporate social responsibility represents a form of corporate self-regulation integrated with the business model and is reflected in the core values of the company: transparency, accountability, partnership, ethical corporate governance, innovation”.

The prominence of the three pillars of sustainability - People, Profit and Planet is highlighted in the strategy statement of the microfinance organization (Crystal) on the webpage: “Our commitment to ending endemic poverty in Georgia and protecting our natural environment is integrated directly into our business model and our corporate strategy through the pursuit of a Triple Bottom Line: People, Planet and Profit. This approach demands decisions based on balance”.

The corporate websites present information about the contribution to SDGs and communicate about the specific sustainability goals the

companies are addressing (Fig. 2). In particular, two microfinance organizations in Georgia - MBC and Crystal provide information about the specific sustainable goals to which they are contributing through CSR activities. Such information is only included in the banks' sustainability/ CSR reports.

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Fig. 2: Georgian MFOs addressing SDGs.

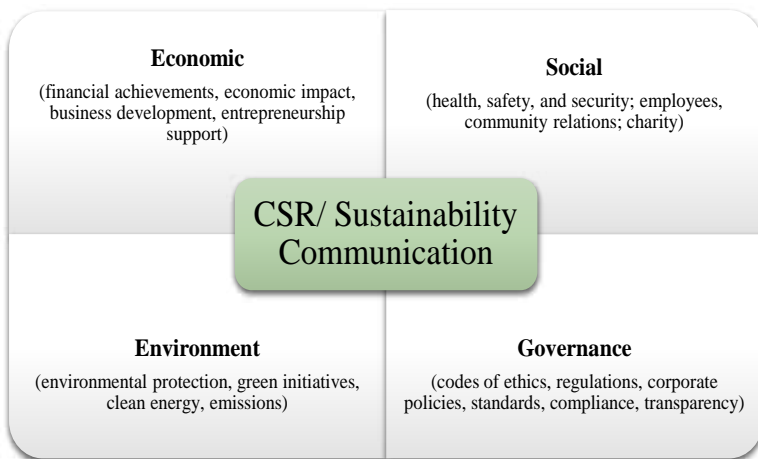
SDG 1	• No Poverty
SDG 3	• Good health and well-being
SDG 4	• Quality Education
SDG 5	• Gender Equality
SDG 7	• Affordable and Clean Energy
SDG 8	• Decent Work and Economic Growth
SDG 9	• Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
SDG 10	• Reduced Inequalities
SDG 12	• Responsible Consumption and Production
SDG 15	• Life on Land
SDG 16	• Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the companies' websites

Strategic communication of CSR on the corporate websites of banks and MFOs

Strategic communication areas of CSR on the corporate websites include messages regarding economic, social, ecological, and governance aspects of the company's strategy (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: CSR/ Sustainability communication on the websites



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the companies' webpages

Banks in Georgia invest heavily in CSR and Sustainability programs to demonstrate their social and ecological orientations. Special attention is devoted to education, charity, and ecological projects. However, the strategic communication lacks the comprehensiveness and coherence. The researched financial companies tend to communicate information on their websites about CSR programs and results briefly without presenting information about the CSR process. They do not always demonstrate the connection of the performed CSR programs with their mission and strategy. This research could not reveal the interrelations among business strategy, CSR, and communication on the websites of banking and microfinance companies.

Thus, more information regarding how sustainability reports are prepared could be beneficial for stakeholders. Since both the implementation of CSR projects and preparation of CSR report involves a complex process with multifaceted stages, the communication of the process as well as the environmental and social impact specific to each company could further improve image, reputation, and 'social license' of operation of financial organizations in the country.

5. Discussions and implications

Since strategic communication aims at centring legitimacy and interaction both among organizations' members and between organizations and communities, a comprehensive approach is required (Falkheimer, 2014). Strategic communication transcends the traditional view of transmitting information as the producing and distributing communication has been shifted toward the long-term strategic goals of organizations (Falkheimer, 2014).

The strategic necessity of communication (Zerfass, 2008) in banking organizations is characterized by growing pressure from shareholders and society in general. The companies are expected to disclose CSR programs and sustainability activities which are difficult to evaluate by third parties outside the organization. Transparency and stakeholder credibility are other strong drivers for financial institutions for CSR communication through corporate websites. Therefore, corporate websites can serve as a successful instrument for strategic communication to strengthen stakeholders' confidence, build a strong brand, improve image, and gain an enhanced reputation.

The CSR programs carried out by the analysed companies are profound considering their financial capacity and desire to enhance their public image, improve their reputation and persuade investors. Accordingly, CSR and sustainability communication of finance companies in Georgia is significant not only for their success, reputation, and brand image but also for promoting sustainable practices and contributing to the economic and social development of the country.

Moreover, contemporary global demands for sustainable development goals and the relevance of corporate responsibility for the banking sector increase interest toward strategic communication. The companies tend to

balance financial, social, and environmental goals, contribute to the SDGs while gaining economic profit.

On the one hand, financial companies need to concentrate on employee well-being, diversity and inclusion, human rights, consumer protection, environmental protection, and social prosperity through adequate governance policies. On the other hand, they should communicate strategically about their efforts regarding ethical and responsible business practices. Particularly, corporate websites as an effective communication tool should be embraced.

The study shows that financial institutions in Georgia are prone to present their CSR orientation on their websites but are less likely to use the strategic communication approach for this purpose. The mission, vision, and strategy statements on corporate websites contain fewer indications of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The communication of banking organizations largely focuses on consumers and investors. Although the websites mention all three pillars of the CSR approach, a lack of comprehensive information about each aspect can cause confusion among the public.

Compared to advanced economies, where companies might have a communications department and CSR/ Sustainability department separately, which engage in cooperation to achieve results (Pollach *et al.*, 2012), Georgian companies lack the staff to work on CSR projects, collect and convey information about it. Often, communications or marketing departments work on all aspects of CSR.

The banking companies should recognize the strategic relevance of CSR communication, and properly communicate corporate values and sustainability commitment.

The websites should encompass the performed CSR projects thoroughly and declare the motives behind those activities while also illustrating a proactive approach to sustainability initiatives (Chang, 2015).

Companies can reap more benefits from CSR if embed the strategic communication approach considering all stakeholder groups rather than targeting solely investors or customers. The interrelationship between CSR and its strategic communication inspires internal and external stakeholders and paves the way to profitable stakeholder engagement leading to mutually beneficial relationships.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on how strategic communication influences CSR and sustainability initiatives within the banking sector. This integration helps in refining existing theories by highlighting the interplay between communication strategies and CSR outcomes. Besides, by focusing on the banking sector in an emerging country, the study adds valuable context-specific insights to the literature. It underscores the unique challenges and opportunities faced by banks in emerging markets, which may differ significantly from those in developed economies. These insights can help in developing more nuanced and contextually relevant theories of CSR and strategic communication. In addition, this qualitative research may lead, in future, to the development of new conceptual frameworks that illustrate the relationship between strategic communication and CSR in the banking

sector. These theoretical frameworks can serve as a basis for future research and practical application, guiding banks in effectively leveraging communication strategies to enhance their CSR efforts. Furthermore, the study's findings can contribute to stakeholder theory by demonstrating how effective strategic communication can enhance stakeholder engagement and trust in CSR initiatives, as it provides empirical support for the idea that transparent and consistent communication is crucial for building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders. In the same way, the study contributes to the Signalling theory by providing empirical evidence on the importance of communicating CSR and sustainability achievements through corporate websites, in addition to social exchange and legitimacy theories supporting firms' engagement in CSR activities.

Finally, the qualitative research can provide theoretical implications for corporate governance by illustrating how strategic communication practices can be incorporated into CSR policies and governance frameworks. This can help in shaping policies that promote ethical behaviour and social responsibility in the banking sector.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research

While scholars emphasize the strategic orientation of CSR in banking sectors (e.g., Georgiadou and Nickerson, 2020; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020), strategic communication of CSR/ Sustainability gains attention as well. This paper explored strategic communication efforts of banking and microfinance companies in Georgia using corporate websites to publish achievements regarding CSR and Sustainability programs. Besides the annual reports, companies use their websites and social media pages to communicate with stakeholders and inform society about their CSR/ Sustainability performance.

Through CSR communication, public support can be gained, which improves the company's image, increases transparency and trust. Under the circumstances when society has ever less trust to business, this is important for business since both business and society must co-exist reaping mutual benefits. However, CSR communication can be perceived as impression management when companies focus only on positive factors of organizational performance omitting information that might be perceived adversely. Consequently, the strategic communication of CSR should include messages regarding the proactive actions and sustainability strategy to be integrated into a company's overall strategy, mission, or vision. In this way, banking companies can differentiate themselves in the market, attract investors and new customers. Therefore, not only CSR programs but also their communication can produce legitimacy and competitive advantage for financial organizations. CSR communication should defeat the cynicism of some stakeholders, engage in proactive communication of sustainability efforts, and hence, obtain benefits from CSR programs (Du *et al.*, 2010).

The research results demonstrate that banks and microfinance organizations recognize the benefits of presenting CSR and sustainability-

related content on their corporate websites. These results are in line with previous studies published (e.g., Eberle *et al.*, 2013; Vollero *et al.*, 2018; 2022; Palazzo *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the studied organizations participate in the annual CSR competition with various projects every year, which shows their commitment to CSR and their continuous efforts in this direction, which is also reflected on their websites.

According to the research results, banking companies and microfinance organizations in Georgia communicate CSR/ Sustainability orientation through their corporate websites. The main CSR/ Sustainability issues communicated by them are economic, environmental, social, and governance pillars. In addition, they emphasize the importance of CSR and sustainable development on their web pages conveying their values. Moreover, they address SDGs and especially, MFOs focus on different goals in this regard on their websites. In particular, they specify sustainability goals the organizations are addressing: SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, and 16. However, the banking and microfinance companies should strengthen their strategic communication of CSR/ Sustainability projects on the corporate websites due to the lack of noticeable and visible strategic links.

Besides, our results have implications for CSR/sustainability managers and communication professionals who should not only present a report on corporate websites but consider more long-term oriented strategic communication as suggested by Pérez and del Bosque (2013).

It is clear, in fact, that the selected organisations show 'embryonal' signs of their interest toward strategic communications. There is a starting process that will guide these companies in the area, however, at the same time, more work needs to be put into practice to reach the goal.

Additionally, in terms of communication, it must be highlighted that the paper presents a specific analysis of the state of the art: the qualitative exploration, in fact, does not take into account past experience in this area implemented by these organisations. This means that it is not possible to say if the companies are increasing or decreasing their focus in strategic and sustainable communication.

The paper offers a picture of how they are embracing strategic communications; therefore, this involves that it is possible to see their personal way of embracing the approach and the benefits they hope to reach thanks to sustainable communication.

Actually, the paper highlighted that Georgian organisations are interested mainly in communicating different contents linked with the SDGs (i.e., social programs; charity activities; etc.). On the other hand, they, also, seem to start paying attention to develop sets of organizational tools and elements that can support the credibility of the information conveyed and the relationships with key stakeholders on the website (i.e., sections dedicated to stakeholder relationship; the presence of Board of sustainability; etc.).

Having said that, to enhance their involvement and to maximise their investments, there are several drivers/facilitators that can be put into practice to strengthen the existing link between sustainability and strategic communication.

In line with Siano *et al.* (2016), the paper suggests to these companies to enhance the strategic orientation to sustainability expressed on their websites. The orientation, in fact, is the strategic approach that defines the core elements of the corporate identity in relation to sustainability. Communicating different statements, in the corporate website - aimed at highlighting the principal values and the core philosophy - oriented towards sustaining economic, social, and environmental requests of stakeholders can be a key driver for Georgian organisations. In corporate websites, these statements should be placed in dedicated sections (i.e., Company Profile; Core Values; etc.).

Strengthening the orientation toward sustainability should embrace drivers/facilitators related to: (i) the “mission”, in which the organisation communicates this approach as the company’s commitment to responsibility issues in the declaration of key purpose and objectives; and to (ii) the “vision”, in which the company shows how the future of the organisation is foreshadowed in terms of commitment.

Furthermore, this study, like any empirical endeavour, has its limitations.

One significant constraint lies in the reliance on qualitative data, which may introduce biases and potential overestimation of positive perceptions due to the importance of strategic communication.

Additionally, the study’s focus on a specific context and demographic might limit the generalizability of findings to diverse companies.

Thus, future research can be devoted to the cultural dimensions of strategic communication of CSR to different groups of stakeholders by analysing various communication channels. This research can be enriched by conducting interviews with the bank managers in order to better understand the communication management issues within the organizations and to provide valuable insights through explanations of the decisions related to CSR communication.

Furthermore, while the qualitative approach offers insights, it might not capture the nuanced quantitative dimensions of strategic communication.

The exploration of the link between strategic communication and sustainability, while illuminating, leaves ample room for future refinement and expansion. A more holistic investigation into the interplay of these fields of study could unravel further dimensions underlying organization-stakeholder relationships.

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Unlocking the power of strategic communication: a deep dive into industrial tourism and engaging company openings

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *This paper investigates the role of strategic communication in industrial tourism, specifically focusing on how companies use storytelling during open-door events to shape visitor perceptions and influence their subsequent behaviors.*

Purpose of the paper: *This paper aims to explore the potential of strategic communication in the context of industrial tourism open-door events, investigating how effective storytelling by companies can positively influence visitors' perceptions. This, in turn, impacts their intentions to purchase, recommend, engage, and their overall satisfaction.*

Methodology: *We employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of storytelling ability (SA) on visitors' perceptions during Open Factory 2022. This involved conducting qualitative interviews with company representatives and administering structured questionnaires to 233 event attendees.*

Findings: *The analysis suggests that open-door events are valuable for companies to communicate their brand stories and enhance internal communication processes. Visitors who perceive companies positively during these events are more likely to make purchases and recommend products.*

Research limits: *The research primarily focuses on B2B companies, which might limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader market context, particularly in understanding consumer behaviour typical of business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases affecting the accuracy of our results.*

Practical implications: *Our study highlights that companies can enhance their communication strategies during industrial tourism open-door events. Emphasising product history, quality, local ties, and the production process increases visitor engagement, satisfaction, and positive behavioural intentions. This approach boosts brand equity, trust, and credibility while promoting transparency and community involvement, encouraging positive word-of-mouth and potential purchase intentions.*

Social implications: *The findings underscore the role of storytelling in fostering transparency and community involvement, which aligns with societal expectations for ethical and responsible business practices and contributes to a more socially responsible business environment.*

Originality of the paper: *this research contributes to the literature by exploring the intersection of strategic communication and industrial tourism. It reveals how effective storytelling during open-door events positively influences visitor perceptions, engagement, and actions, shedding light on innovative communication approaches within this underexplored context. Future research should explore the impact of*

strategic communication in different contexts, including B2C interactions, and address the limitations of self-reported data by incorporating more objective measures. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of storytelling on visitor perceptions and behaviour.

Key words: corporate communication; open-door events; factory openings; storytelling; reputation; consumers' behaviour

1. Introduction

The domain of industrial-pertaining company visits and open-door events where external people can visit working production plants brims with potential for practitioners across different fields. However, it has received limited attention in academic literature so far.

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that a significant portion of the existing literature addressing the impacts of company openings draws from the field of industrial tourism. Yet, the effects and insights derived from these studies underscore the profound relevance of such events when viewed through the lenses of strategic management and strategic communication.

Specifically, scholars have recognised that company openings and factory visits offer a distinctive platform for companies to employ strategic communication, providing unique opportunities to explore innovative modes of communication. Through these events, companies can establish a multifaceted channel for engagement, as they offer distinct experiences to a diverse audience consisting of customers, suppliers, and the local community (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell and Orwig 2002). According to Jansirani and Mangai (2013) and Chow *et al.* (2017), factory visits can also help companies build brand awareness by showcasing their operations and products engagingly and interactively. Furthermore, by inviting visitors to tour their facilities, companies can create a positive image of themselves as transparent and open organisations, reinforcing trust and credibility with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

Beyond their value in enhancing brand awareness, industrial tourism in general and open-door events in particular can be used to educate the public about the company's products, industry, and processes. This can help create a more informed and engaged audience that can better understand and appreciate the value of the company's products and services (Friel, Ben Youssef, 2022). Last but not least, these events present an avenue for companies to generate revenue by charging admission fees and marketing merchandise, underlining their multifaceted role as both communication tools and income-generating endeavours (Weiermair and Kronenberg, 2010).

Therefore, by using company openings as a tool to build brand awareness, create a positive image, educate the public, and generate revenue, companies can strengthen their relationships with their stakeholders and create new opportunities for growth and success.

In achieving these results, strategic communication plays a crucial role, also in shaping visitor actions and influencing their perceptions towards

a brand (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015; Nwogwugwu, 2018). An effective communication strategy addressed to engaging with visitors can empower companies to positively influence several intangibles, such as brand reputation, ethical behaviour, and overall stakeholder satisfaction (De Beer, 2014; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017; Foroudi *et al.*, 2020). The ability to create and convey narratives through employee representation or the materials produced represents a key aspect of the communication process that companies could implement for interacting with visitors (Dessart and Pitardi, 2019; Kang *et al.*, 2020).

This study explores how company strategic communication directed at visitors can positively influence brand actions, highlighting the significance of communication in motivating and engaging visitors.

By using primary data collected from 233 visitors to the industrial tourism event Open Factory 2022 in Italy, our research investigated the relationship between strategic communication, industrial tourism, and stakeholder behaviour, providing insights into how companies can effectively employ communication to build a favourable reputation and leave a lasting impression on customers.

2. Background and literature review

2.1 Strategic communication: building reputation and relations with stakeholders

Strategic communication is a broad topic based on vast literature, which, over the years, has been explored in depth by both scholars and practitioners from numerous perspectives. Introduced by Hallahan *et al.* (2007), as the deliberate use of communication to serve an organisation's mission, the definition and the scope of strategic communication have changed considerably over the last fifteen years and in recent times, some prevailing interpretations have emerged.

A first interpretation conceives the concept of strategic communication as an umbrella term for all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organisations to address their stakeholders (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). A second one shifts the focus on the strategic and decisional role that communication takes on in the context of contemporary, large, private, and publicly traded companies (Argenti, 2016; Stanton, 2017; Volk and Zerfass, 2018). The third interpretation develops from this concept, which sees strategic communication as a substantial evolution compared to corporate communication, becoming a defining trait of the organisations themselves. In fact, in their contribution, Invernizzi and Romenti (2018) declare that communication has become one of the functions that govern companies and that it is increasingly used to achieve company objectives.

Indeed, the discourse surrounding strategic communication highlights the dynamic nature of this field. Furthermore, the debate continues between the proponents of strategy as the primary determinant of success and scholars who question its role, arguing that the connection between strategy and success may be more complex and elusive (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

Strategic communication is pivotal in moulding and amplifying an organisation, and the strategy behind an organisation's communication, directly swaying its public perception. The enhancement of reputation is indeed tied to the heightened consistency, transparency, and encouragement of feedback that strategic communication offers. Carefully strategised communication guarantees uniform messaging throughout an organisation's channels, fostering a reliable and strong organisational perception. Additionally, when organisations employ strategic communication to convey transparent and truthful details, they cultivate trust and authenticity among their audience.

Moreover, Strategic communication is essential in shaping the intricate web of relationships organisations maintain with their stakeholders, including customers, partners, suppliers, employees, and investors. Clear and purposeful communication is foundational for these networks to thrive. It's through honest and consistent messaging that trust, the bedrock of these relationships, is nurtured. Such communication not only simplifies collaborative efforts within these networks but also delineates roles, establishes clear expectations, and promotes the exchange of feedback. The open dissemination of knowledge and insights ensures the network remains informed and connected. A key benefit of adept strategic communication is the deepening of stakeholder involvement. Engaging stakeholders proactively and keeping them abreast of developments allows organisations to synchronise their ambitions, principles, and aims, solidifying bonds within their networks. This cohesion proves invaluable, especially during challenging times marked by disputes or misunderstandings, as it facilitates swift and effective resolutions.

In conclusion, the literature on strategic communication emerges as a field in transition, marked by various interpretations, challenges, and opportunities. The objective is to discern the distinctive essence of non-physical assets. While intangible assets lack tangible presence, they are instrumental in determining an organisation's worth, public perception, and competitive edge.

Strategic communication is instrumental in determining an organisation's reputation. When clear, consistent messages reflect the organisation's core values, they bolster its credibility with stakeholders. However, lapses in communication or misaligned messages can tarnish this reputation. In short, the quality of strategic communication, both in practical terms, differentiates it from other disciplines, such as marketing communication, public relations or public diplomacy, and in academic terms, to define its research objectives and establish a specific research perspective.

2.2 Open-doors: definition, origins and effects

The concept behind open-doors is relatively straightforward: these are events where access is permitted to buildings not normally open to the public. In corporate settings, open-doors are not as widespread, and are mainly organised within industrial plants. Despite being less common, these events allow organisations to open their doors to a diverse array

of visitors, offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse into their operations, products, and services. This practice falls under the broader concept of industrial tourism, which Frew (2008) defines as involving visits to operational industrial sites where the primary function is not tourism. The emphasis is on “operational,” distinguishing these sites from industrial heritage attractions that showcase former industrial activities (Goodall, 1994). Industrial tourism allows visitors to engage with an industry’s live, functional aspects, providing a unique insight into contemporary production and operational processes (Lee, 2016).

Analysing this phenomenon from a tourism perspective, the origins of factory openings can be traced back to the Sixties, when the US Travel Service and the US Department of Commerce published the guide “Plant Tours in the United States.” Concurrently, European companies also began opening their doors to the public to promote their products and attract new customers (Otgaar, 2012).

A classic of children’s literature of the time, “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” (1964) by the British writer Roald Dahl, captures the essence of company openings well by describing how a factory visit provides insights into the product, company structure, and production process, and, also, in this specific case, some magic.

However, although these events transcend mere corporate hospitality or public relations exercises, offering a powerful platform for organisations to communicate their brand values and strategic objectives directly to an engaged audience, academic research exploring the convergence of factory openings and strategic communication remains scant. Considering this research gap, it becomes necessary to carry out a literature review more focused on the phenomenon of industrial tourism as a whole. Some of the findings, in fact, pertain to the specific effects of open-doors on organisations.

First of all, these events serve as potent marketing and public relations tools (Novoselova, 2021; Montenegro *et al.*, 2023), providing a unique opportunity for companies to foster engagement with various stakeholders (Otgaar, 2010). Furthermore, organisations can use them to enhance their brand equity, establish a distinctive strategic position within their respective industries (Montenegro *et al.*, 2023) and demonstrate good citizenship (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002).

Existing research has also shown how organising industrial tourism experiences offers a valuable opportunity to better understand the product’s value through the eyes of customer-visitors (Lee, 2015; Friel and Ben Youssef, 2022), create a connection between visitors and the brand (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002; Chow *et al.*, 2015), and promote firsthand knowledge of industrial work and culture (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002; Novoselova, 2021).

Notable implications also include fostering intra-company education on corporate values, culture, history, and heritage. This is achieved through the involvement of employees, workers, and managers in public-facing activities. Scholars have highlighted how company openings can facilitate learning processes that strengthen internal organisation within host companies (Brunetti *et al.*, 2018; Castellani *et al.*, 2019). Last but not

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least, factory openings are considered a potential source of income and employment (Otgaar, 2010; Roche, 2012; Novoselova, 2021).

2.3 Conceptual framework and research questions

Although scholars have overlooked the intersection between open-door events and strategic communication, existing studies have (at least indirectly) pointed out how these events can be an effective way for companies to develop new communication strategies. More precisely, Chow *et al.* (2017) investigated whether there are any disparities in brand equity among tourists who have different experiences while visiting (such as the product-use experience, interpreter guidance experience, and brand orientation experience). Additionally, existing studies explore whether visitors to industrial tourism sites enhance their perceptions of brand equity, starting from the lowest to the highest levels, based on factors such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

Building upon these insights, we will delve into another critical facet of strategic communication, namely the effects of storytelling ability on stakeholders' perceptions, and then further analyse how perceptions can influence their purchasing and recommendation behaviours.

A key facet of strategic communication is represented by the company's storytelling ability (SA), which could be defined as the organisational capability to tell an engaging story, addressed to capture stakeholders' attention and stimulate their imagination (Mani and Mishra, 2022). In this information-rich, competitive era, effective storytelling skills can distinguish a company from competitors, captivate the interest of its intended audience, and establish a profound bond with stakeholders (Júnior *et al.* 2023). Through storytelling, companies can mould their brand identity and effectively convey their fundamental values, mission, and distinctive selling points (Gasparin *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, by carefully constructing narratives that align with customers' values, needs, and aspirations, companies can forge an emotional bond, cultivate trust and loyalty (Kemp *et al.*, 2023), and foster a sense of reliability and dedication with their audience. Finally, through the application of storytelling techniques, companies have the power to make their messages and brand experiences more indelible in the minds of customers (Dessart and Standaert, 2023), to the point of swaying customers' decision-making processes when evaluating purchases or seeking recommendations. Finally, the power of captivating storytelling can have a profound impact on how customers perceive a company and its offerings (Burnell *et al.*, 2023). When companies share stories that deeply resonate with stakeholders, effectively address their needs, and emphasise the advantages and value of their products or services, they can shape positive perceptions, foster trust, and inspire customer loyalty (Nyagadza *et al.*, 2020).

Looking at company open-doors events, a first research question arises:

RQ1. To what extent could the storytelling ability of companies that open their doors positively impact visitors' perceptions towards the organisation?

The impact of stakeholders' perceptions on intentions to purchase and recommend products or services is well-documented in marketing and communication literature (Ariffin *et al.*, 2018; Yu, Lee, 2018; Aziz *et al.*, 2019). Positive perceptions, influenced by factors such as, for instance, brand reputation, product quality, trustworthiness, and social responsibility, have the power to increase stakeholders' inclination to make a purchase (Visentin *et al.*, 2019) and/or a recommendation (Fileri *et al.*, 2018; Visentin, 2019; Fatmawati and Fauzan, 2021). For the latter, when stakeholders have a favourable perception of a product or service, either through personal experiences or the company's established reputation (Mbango, 2019) they are more likely to share positive word-of-mouth recommendations with friends, family, or colleagues, consequently shaping others' purchasing decisions (Rajendran and Arun, 2021). Conversely, negative perceptions or doubts surrounding a company's credibility, value proposition, or ethical behaviour can discourage stakeholders from purchasing (Pentina *et al.*, 2018).

Based on this literature, understanding how perceptions influence purchasing behaviour could provide valuable insights into leveraging industrial tourism for market growth and consumer engagement.

RQ2. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organisation impact their intention to purchase its products?

Moreover, beyond influencing purchasing behaviour, industrial tourism may also affect visitors' likelihood of recommending the organisation to others.

RQ3. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organisation impact their intention to recommend it?

In addition to the intention to buy or recommend, stakeholders' perceptions could also impact the level of engagement attitude, intended as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions" (Hollebeek, 2011). Overall, positive perceptions create a conducive environment for increased engagement across different stakeholder groups, (Cabrera *et al.*, 2006; Malinen *et al.*, 2013). This heightened engagement can include repeat business, active participation, advocacy, investment, or collaborative endeavours (Viglia *et al.*, 2018). As a result, the overall relationship between stakeholders and the company is fortified, fostering stronger connections and mutual benefits (Hollebeek, 2011; Malinen *et al.*, 2013; Cabrera *et al.*, 2006; Morrongiello *et al.*, 2017).

RQ4. How could positive visitors' perceptions of the organisation impact their engagement attitude?

Finally, studies in the marketing and communication fields underline the increasing impact of stakeholders' perceptions on their level of satisfaction towards a company (Chang *et al.*, 2009; Krepapa *et al.*, 2003; Spreng *et al.*

et al., 1996; Galan-Ladero *et al.*, 2013). Stakeholders' satisfaction levels are significantly shaped by their perceptions of a company, its products, and its services. Positive perceptions such as perceiving exceptional product quality, outstanding customer service, and a favourable value proposition, play a key role in elevating satisfaction (Galan-Ladero *et al.*, 2013). Conversely, negative perceptions, characterised by instances of underwhelming product performance, unresponsive customer support, or inconsistent experiences, can result in diminished satisfaction levels (Chang *et al.*, 2009; Krepapa *et al.* 2003; Spreng *et al.*, 1996; Galan-Ladero *et al.*, 2013).

Based on this literature, a final research question can be assumed:

RQ5. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organisation impact their level of satisfaction?

To provide a concise overview of the primary authors referenced in this study, the significant gaps identified, and the central themes explored, we provide a reasoned synthesis of the key works and central themes in tourism and strategic communication. The literature on tourism, particularly industrial tourism, underscores the significance of open-door events in enhancing brand equity, fostering engagement with stakeholders, and promoting transparency. Key contributions by scholars such as Frew (2008), Otgaar (2012), and Montenegro *et al.* (2023) highlight the marketing and public relations potential of these events, demonstrating how they offer unique opportunities for companies to connect with diverse audiences and showcase their operational processes. Furthermore, studies by Mitchell and Orwig (2002) and Chow *et al.* (2017) illustrate the potential for creating strong emotional connections between visitors and brands during these events. Despite these insights, a significant gap remains in understanding the strategic communication aspects of these events, specifically how storytelling ability (SA) can be leveraged to shape visitor perceptions and behaviours.

On the other hand, the literature on strategic communication, as explored by Hallahan *et al.* (2007), Zerfass *et al.* (2018), and Mani and Mishra (2022), emphasises the role of strategic communication in building reputation and relationships with stakeholders through consistent, transparent, and engaging narratives. This body of work highlights the dynamic nature of strategic communication and its evolution into a critical function within organisations, essential for achieving business objectives and fostering stakeholder trust. Scholars such as Júnior *et al.* (2023) and Gasparin *et al.* (2022) have demonstrated how effective storytelling can distinguish a company from its competitors, captivate stakeholder interest, and convey an organisation's core values and mission. However, despite extensive research on these theoretical frameworks and practical applications, there is a need for empirical studies examining the direct impact of SA on stakeholders' perceptions in the context of industrial tourism.

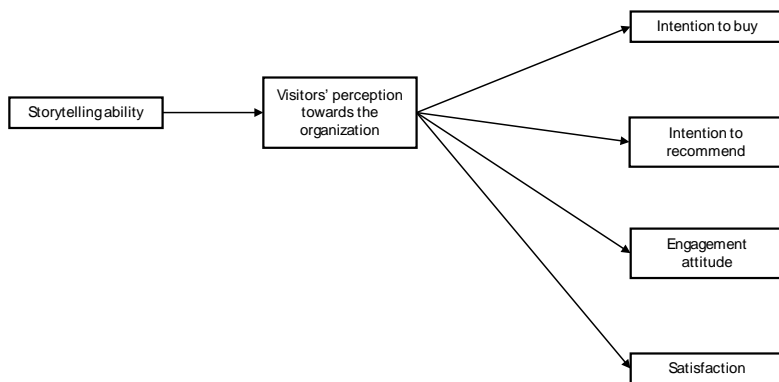
Our study addresses these gaps by exploring how storytelling during open-door events influences visitors' perceptions, intentions to purchase,

recommendation behaviours, engagement attitudes, and satisfaction levels. By integrating insights from both fields, our research provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of strategic communication through storytelling in industrial tourism settings. This not only contributes to a deeper understanding of how these events can be used to enhance stakeholder relationships and brand equity but also offers practical implications for organisations seeking to leverage their communication strategies to achieve strategic goals. Consequently, our study bridges the gap between the theoretical discourse on strategic communication and its practical application in industrial tourism, thereby contributing valuable new insights to both fields.

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Figure 1 graphically synthesises the hypothetical research model of the study.

Fig. 1: Hypothetical research model



Source: own elaboration

3. Methodology and data

3.1 Open factory

To address these RQ, we devised a survey and conducted interviews at the Open Factory’s 2022 edition.

Open Factory, organised annually since 2015 by ItalyPost and Goodnet, opens the doors of Italian factories to the public. It aims to showcase companies, foster community connections, and highlight the importance of factories for the country’s future. The event includes guided tours, workshops, conferences, and book presentations.

In particular, with guided tours inside the companies and production facilities that participate every year in the initiative, Open Factory offers the public a great opportunity to discover the companies through the stories of employees and management who accompany visitors in exploring the company spaces and production processes.

The uniqueness of this event makes it a suitable field of investigation due to its broad coverage of the national territory and the number of

visitors involved. Therefore, it offers a rare opportunity to collect detailed data on Italian industrial openings.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study employed a two-step mixed-method approach: the first part included qualitative interviews with the entrepreneurs and managers of some companies opening their doors for the event. In contrast, the second part involved a quantitative research component, with questionnaires designed to gather data directly from visitors.

Interviews with companies were conducted to explore the perspectives and practices of entrepreneurs, namely what they believed to be the crucial elements of communication with visitors during the event, the channels used, and the expected outcomes. The choice to adopt a qualitative approach using interviews was dictated by the desire to leave more freedom in their feedback, allowing them to delve deeper into the topics in which they already have significant expertise and know-how.

Eleven companies were interviewed, and the selection criteria were based on their involvement in the event, ensuring that they possessed firsthand knowledge and experiences related to communicating with visitors during the Open Factory event. Interviews were semi-structured, as this method allowed for greater flexibility in exploring diverse aspects of the communication strategies employed.

The qualitative data from the interviews served as a first source of information for driving our conclusions, enabling a deeper exploration of the entrepreneurs' perspectives on communicating with visitors during the Open Factory event. Combined with the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire such findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the event's communication dynamics, allowing for a robust analysis of the research objectives.

The second part of the study employed a quantitative approach to investigate the perceptions and experiences of individuals who visited industrial plants during the Open Factory event. People interested in attending the event were asked to register on the official website beforehand, where they shared an email address. After the event, the generated mailing list served as the channel to forward an email containing a structured questionnaire with 22 closed-ended and Likert-scale items as part of the data-gathering procedure.

It should be noted that, while Open Factory is a B2C event that allows individuals to visit production plants of companies willing to open their doors, it is also true that such companies were mainly B2B-oriented, thus respondents of the questionnaire likely weren't (potential) customers.

The questionnaire was designed based on a review of the existing literature, specifically focusing on prior research to ensure compliance with established methodologies and capture relevant dimensions of interest.

Each construct has been measured with multiple statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one ("strongly disagree") to five ("strongly agree"). The measure for SA had three items (adapted from Li *et al.*, 2019), while the measures for stakeholders' perceptions had three items (adapted

from Chow *et al.*, 2017). The purchase intention has been measured using a single item from Kim *et al.*, 2011. Net promoter score had been measured by adapting a single item from Mandal and Mati, 2022. Similarly, the engagement attitude had a single item adapted from O'Brien *et al.*, 2018. Finally, the satisfaction level had six items (adapted from Alkilani *et al.*, 2013).

The selected questions focused on gathering data about visitor demographics, motivations for participation, perceptions of the company and its products, communication aspects, satisfaction, and industrial tourism habits.

A total of 233 interviews were collected from Open Factory visitors. Upon completion of the data collection phase, responses were entered into IBM-SPSS for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise elements like participants' demographic characteristics, motivations, channels used and satisfaction. Finally, in this initial phase of the research, the correlations between the different items considered by the model were analysed.

4. Results

4.1 *Communication strategies of companies in industrial tourism open-door events*

During qualitative interviews, respondents expressed their perspectives on open-door events such as Open Factory and their impact on the companies' storytelling.

The first topic investigated was the usefulness of such events for communicating an organisation's story. Participants had differing opinions: some described Open Factory as moderately useful, stating that it provided a platform for communication but did not significantly impact their storytelling efforts. Others saw it as highly valuable, allowing them to showcase their entrepreneurial journeys and experiences. Interviews also revealed that many managers found Open Factory useful for testing new external communication narratives. However, a smaller group of respondents shared a different enthusiasm, believing these events were less relevant for testing new communication approaches.

Respondents highlighted the significance of Open Factory and similar events when discussing internal communication processes. They described it as very useful in strengthening communication channels within their companies. Open Factory was seen as a platform that facilitated better collaboration, knowledge sharing, and internal cohesion. The general feeling was that factory-opening events foster a sense of unity within the organisation and provide employees with opportunities to engage with one another and even exchange ideas. On the other hand, when it came to discussing the usefulness of such events as a new direct sales channel, a majority of professionals expressed that they are not useful in this aspect. Yet, this might be explained by the very nature of the companies involved, as some operate in the B2B segment or in specific niches.

Key elements consistently highlighted for communicating with visitors during the event included the company's brand, connection to the territory, history, and product quality. Some managers also mentioned emphasising the company's innovative approach and commitment to sustainability. In contrast, aspects like employee stories, distribution strategies, and entrepreneurial challenges were considered less important. When it came to promoting participation in Open Factory, most companies preferred using their website and social media, while the company's newsletter and third-party websites and social accounts were less frequently chosen.

During the in-person interviews, participating companies were also asked to express their expectations regarding Open Factory and industrial tourism events. A primary common goal that emerged was to enhance the perception of their production plant's quality. They believed that showcasing high production standards and the professionalism of their staff would help achieve this objective. Another key expectation was to improve the clarity surrounding their initiatives. Companies saw Open Factory as a valuable platform to clearly communicate their objectives and strategies to visitors, providing a transparent understanding of their initiatives and aspirations.

Moreover, companies planned to enhance their visibility on social media platforms. They perceived Open Factory as a platform to bolster their online presence, capitalise on social media networks, and engage with a broader audience, even though, as previously mentioned, this expectation wasn't met since attendees used traditional word of mouth as their main source of information.

Conversely, while stimulating consumer intent to purchase and enhancing credibility were acknowledged, these aspects were not the primary focus for the interviewed companies. Instead, their central objective was to address the previously mentioned goals to maximise the benefits of their participation in the event.

4.2 Communication impact on visitors' experience

As outlined in the methodology section, a quantitative research design was employed to explore the motivations behind event attendance, the diverse information channels utilised by participants, their perceptions of the event, and the subsequent actions they expressed interest/willingness to pursue.

Regarding demographics, the majority of the 233 respondents fall within the age groups of 56-65 (29,2%) and 46-55 (24,9%). Concerning gender, the sample is almost evenly split between males (49,8%) and females (50,2%).

Almost 30% came to know about the Open Factory event by word of mouth, another 30,3% from the company's social media, website and newsletter, and 23,1% discovered the event from the organisers mailing list.

The reasons for attending the factory opening were ranked on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest level of influence). The most significant motives for attendance included the interest to understand better the production

process, including how the productive activity is organised and how a product is born, with 55,8% and 57,5% of respondents mentioning them as extremely relevant (5 out of 5). The interest in knowing more about a company operating in the local territory is also very important (51,5%).

A specific professional interest in the company or industry was also a significant driver, with 36,9% considering it particularly important. This suggests that participants were driven by a desire to deepen their knowledge and gain insights relevant to their professional pursuits.

In contrast, the possibility to directly purchase the products had little impact on visitors' decisions, with only 6,4% of respondents assigning a relevance score of 5 out of 5 to this item.

Tab. 1: Motivation in attending the company visit

	1	2	3	4	5
Specific professional interest for the company/ industry	18,0%	9,0%	17,2%	18,9%	36,9%
Friends/relatives who work in the company	60,1%	3,9%	5,6%	8,6%	21,9%
Interest in getting to know better a company that operates in the area of residence	6,9%	4,3%	12,9%	24,9%	51,1%
Better understand how a product is born	3,0%	2,1%	10,3%	27,0%	57,5%
Better understand how a productive activity is organised	1,7%	1,7%	9,4%	31,3%	55,8%
Interest in having a different tourist experience	28,8%	12,4%	19,7%	16,3%	22,7%
Direct purchase of products	60,9%	10,3%	14,2%	8,2%	6,4%

Source: own elaboration

After the visit, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (70,1% in total) when asked if they would be able to better recognise the company they visited if compared to competitors. Moreover, 90,1% would recommend it to friends, highlighting their willingness to share positive experiences and endorse the visited company to their social circle. This means that the companies hosting the visits managed to make them interesting and to communicate their values, a factor also highlighted by the perceived good reputation (respondents agreed or strongly agreed in 95,3% of cases), and – albeit to a lesser extent – to encourage the sale of its products, as 61,3% of visitors would be willing to buy them after the visit. Despite some of the companies operating in B2B segments or in specific niches, this result is important for the implications on the repeatability of the initiative in different business contexts as well, demonstrating that open-door events can prove to be an effective call-to-action for visitors to purchase products.

Last but not least, the vast majority of respondents (96,6% fall within 4 or 5 out of 5) consider the visited company as reliable, allowing to infer that the visit may impact the perception of visitors concerning the ability of the firm to deliver quality products and services, maintain a strong reputation, and foster trust among its stakeholders (Table 2).

Tab. 2: Agreement over the following statements

	1	2	3	4	5
I already knew/heard about the company	9,9%	7,3%	6,0%	19,0%	57,8%
I would be able to better recognise the company I visited compared to other competitors	7,9%	5,7%	16,3%	23,8%	46,3%
The company is reliable	0,4%	0,9%	2,1%	15,5%	81,1%
The company I visited has a good reputation	0,9%	0,0%	3,9%	16,4%	78,9%
The company I visited speaks honestly to the consumer	0,9%	0,9%	9,1%	25,1%	64,1%
I would like to recommend the company I visited to my friends	0,9%	4,3%	4,7%	19,7%	70,4%
I would like to buy the products/services offered by the company I visited	20,0%	8,3%	10,4%	20,0%	41,3%
I would like to share the contents of the visit on my social accounts	27,9%	15,0%	19,0%	11,9%	26,1%

Source: own elaboration

In terms of the elements well communicated, Table 3 highlights how the majority of respondents (55,7%) expressed that the company's brand was effectively conveyed during the visit. This suggests that visitors gained a clear understanding of the company's brand identity and values. Similarly, the history of the products was considered well communicated by a majority of respondents (56,7%), indicating that visitors were informed about the origins and evolution of the company. Yet, the quality of the offer was undoubtedly the best element, as 73,0% of respondents stated this element was extremely well communicated (5 out of 5).

On the other hand, topics like the personal history of the entrepreneur, the target market, and the distribution strategies generally received lower scores in terms of communication. This could depend on the choice of describing the company during the visit in a more narrative and less descriptive way.

Notably, the stories from employees had the highest number of low results (26,0% assigned a 1 out of 5 result), indicating that this aspect was communicated poorly during the visit.

These results are mainly in line with the elements the managers deemed as important: the company's brand, its connection with the territory, and the history of the products were considered more important, and so were properly and effectively communicated, as later confirmed by the public. On the other hand, the elements perceived by attendees as less communicated (precisely because managers found them less relevant) were the stories from employees, distribution strategies, and the difficulties encountered during their entrepreneurial lives.

Tab. 3: Elements well communicated during the visit

	1	2	3	4	5
The company's brand	2,6%	3,0%	10,9%	27,8%	55,7%
The personal history of the entrepreneur	13,0%	10,4%	19,5%	23,4%	33,8%
The history of the company	3,0%	4,3%	15,6%	26,8%	50,2%
The history of the products	1,7%	3,4%	13,3%	24,9%	56,7%
The quality	0,9%	1,3%	6,9%	18,0%	73,0%
The connection with the territory	2,6%	7,3%	18,1%	28,4%	43,5%
The difficulties encountered	13,7%	17,2%	25,6%	21,1%	22,5%
The target markets	6,6%	10,5%	18,9%	32,9%	31,1%
Distribution strategies	6,1%	12,1%	25,5%	24,7%	31,6%
Stories from employees	26,0%	19,8%	23,8%	12,3%	18,1%

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Source: own elaboration

Last but not least, concerning satisfaction, visitors were extremely satisfied in almost every aspect: except for informative material, which got 36,5% of maximum results, the other items were all valued as highly satisfactory in more than 65% of cases (Tab. 4). General satisfaction best represents this trend, with an overwhelming 76,0% of extremely positive judgements.

Findings also suggest that the informative material offered during Open Factory was well-received yet needed to be improved, while the clarity of explanation was a major strength for most of the companies, which eventually led to high levels of satisfaction.

Tab. 4: Elements of satisfaction regarding the visit

	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of products	0,4%	0,4%	4,7%	27,0%	67,4%
Quality of productive plants	0,4%	1,7%	6,4%	24,5%	67,0%
Informative material	5,2%	6,9%	22,3%	29,2%	36,5%
Staff professionalism	0,9%	1,7%	5,2%	20,2%	72,1%
Clarity of explanation during the visit	1,3%	1,7%	5,2%	16,7%	75,1%
General satisfaction	0,0%	1,3%	3,0%	19,7%	76,0%

Source: own elaboration

Table 5 examines the relationship between the SA and visitors' perceptions regarding various aspects of a company. Results indicate that all the variables under consideration are significantly correlated ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, a significant and moderately strong positive correlation is observed in all cases, with a Pearson coefficient correlation ranging from 0.309 to 0.410.

These findings suggest that a strong SA, based on different sources, is positively associated with visitors' perceptions of the company's reputation, reliability, and ethical behaviour, with the history of the company presenting greater effects, while the stories from the employees having a lower impact on visitors' perspective.

Tab. 5: Correlations of Storytelling Ability and Visitors' Perceptions

	VisitorsPerceptions1- GoodReputation	VisitorsPerceptions2- GoodReliability	VisitorsPerceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior
Storytelling Ability1 – Personal history of entrepreneur	.320**	.302**	.379**
Storytelling Ability2 – History of the company	.391**	.410**	.391**
Storytelling Ability3 – Stories from employees	.309**	.309**	.309**

**p<0.05

Source: own elaboration

Table 6 shows that all variables associated with visitors' perception (good reputation, reliability, and company's ethical behaviour) demonstrate significant associations with visitors' intentions to buy and recommend ($p < 0.05$). The findings show strong correlations between a positive reputation and the intention to recommend ($r = 0.701$) and between perceptions of the company's reliability and the intention to recommend ($r = 0.555$). Additionally, perceptions of ethical behaviour were positively correlated with the intention to purchase ($r = 0.351$) and recommend ($r = 0.622$). These results indicate that visitors' perceptions of these factors are significant determinants of their intentions to purchase and recommend products from the company. Hence, organisations aiming to influence visitors' behaviour positively should focus on establishing a good reputation, promoting reliability, and demonstrating consistent ethical behaviour.

Tab. 6: Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organisation and the intention to buy and intention to recommend

	Intention to buy	Intention to recommend
Visitors Perceptions1- GoodReputation	.261**	.701**
Visitors Perceptions2- GoodReliability	.223**	.555**
Visitors Perceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior	.351**	.622**

**p<0.05

Source: own elaboration

Lastly, Table 7 addresses the correlations between visitors' perceptions of the organisation, engagement attitude, and level of satisfaction. Results revealed significant ($p < 0.05$) and moderate to quite strong associations among the variables under investigation.

Specifically, visitors' perception of the company's reliability seems to be the least influential on general satisfaction ($r = .296$), while the ethical behaviour of the company ($r = 0.382$) and its reputation ($r = 0.489$) have a stronger correlation. A perceived good reputation is also positively correlated with satisfaction over the quality of the products and

the quality of the production plant. Perceptions towards the company's reputation, reliability and ethical behaviour are positively correlated with the engagement attitude (respectively $r=.321$; $r=.336$; $r=.411$).

These results confirm once again that visitors who perceive the organisation as having a good reputation, high reliability, and ethical behaviour are also more satisfied overall and are willing to show their attitude to engage with the organisation.

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Tab. 7: Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organisation and the engagement attitude and level of satisfaction

	Engagement attitude	Satisfaction- Quality of products	Satisfaction- Quality of prod plants	Satisfaction- Informative material	Satisfaction- Staff professionalism	Satisfaction- Clarity of explanation	Satisfaction- General satisfaction
Visitors Perceptions1- Good Reputation	.321**	.379**	.383**	.306**	.437**	.477**	.489**
Visitors Perceptions2- Good Reliability	.336**	.321**	.331**	.246**	.332**	.328**	.296**
Visitors Perceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior	.411**	.311**	.388**	.500**	.465**	.475**	.382**

** $p<0.05$

Source: own elaboration

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

5.1 Implications of the research

Our study aimed to explore how a company's SA during a visit impacts visitors' perceptions towards the company and to investigate the impact of visitors' perceptions on their intentions, engagement attitudes, and level of satisfaction towards the company. Open-door events such as Open Factory allow people to visit companies and offer unique opportunities to explore innovative communication approaches, providing distinct experiences to a heterogeneous audience (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell, Orwig, 2002).

Our results suggest that storytelling is a powerful tool for building positive visitor perceptions, subsequently influencing their behavioural intentions. This finding supports and extends the work of previous scholars (e.g., Kemp *et al.*, 2023), underscoring the importance of narrative in strategic communication within industrial contexts. By incorporating storytelling into open-door events, companies can improve their business outcomes through increased purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, online engagement, and satisfaction. Additionally, the results offer important information to businesses to better understand the reasons that drive people to participate in industrial tourism experiences and, therefore, better direct their communication strategies.

The first reason that drives people to visit industrial plants is to know more about a company that operates in the area of their residence. This can be particularly important for people interested in supporting local businesses or wanting to learn more about the economic activities that take

place in their community. A second reason is that people want to better understand how a product is born. Industrial tourism experiences can allow visitors to see the production process firsthand, which can help them gain a deeper appreciation for the work that goes into creating a product (Swarbrooke and Horner 2002; Montenegro *et al.*, 2023). Finally, people may be interested in industrial tourism experiences because they want to better understand how a productive activity is organised. This includes learning about the various stages of production, the roles of different employees, and the types of technologies and equipment used in the production process.

Findings suggest that effective communication, including compelling narratives that evoke a sense of place and showcase the role of employees, can enhance brand actions and visitor engagement and ultimately contribute to the reputation-building process. Inviting visitors to visit their facilities allows companies to cultivate a positive image of transparent and open organisations, thus strengthening trust and credibility among customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. To achieve such results, specific and targeted storytelling is necessary. Storytelling has long been recognised as a powerful communication tool that allows organisations to connect with their audience on a deeper level. By creating engaging narratives, organisations can emotionally involve stakeholders, create meaningful connections, and shape perceptions positively. During company openings, storytelling plays a crucial role in conveying the organisation's values, history, and unique selling propositions.

Our research offers valuable insights by exploring both company and visitor perspectives, highlighting how effective communication during these events can boost visitor engagement and actions. To positively influence visitor perceptions, companies should emphasise product history, quality, local ties, and the creative production process, as visitors highly appreciated these. In fact, questionnaires revealed high satisfaction levels, improved recognition, reputation, and trust among attendees. Furthermore, Open Factory attendees showed a strong inclination to recommend the companies they visited, consider purchasing their offerings, and potentially share their experiences on social media. These factors contribute to the event's overall success and impact.

Last but not least, this work offers implications that extend to societal implications beyond business outcomes. As an example, open-door events serve as platforms for companies to demonstrate their commitment to community involvement and sustainable business practices, fostering a sense of local pride and responsibility among visitors. Additionally, these events provide valuable opportunities to educate the public about the economic contributions of local businesses, fostering greater appreciation and support for regional industries and their role in driving economic prosperity.

Therefore, this research's preliminary outcomes are intriguing and provide actionable insights for practitioners into leveraging storytelling during industrial tourism events.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

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However, these initial results warrant a more nuanced examination, especially when considering the constraints inherent in this study. A key limitation to note is the homogeneity of the companies involved. While relevant for assessing communication strategies, the predominance of business-to-business (B2B) companies in the sample might have influenced the results, particularly in terms of the visitors' purchasing behaviour. This focus on B2B companies means that the study's insights may not fully encapsulate the consumer behaviour dynamics typically seen in a business-to-consumer (B2C) market.

In B2B transactions, purchasing decisions are often driven by factors like long-term value, return on investment, and the relationship between businesses, which differ significantly from the impulsive or emotionally influenced decisions common in B2C interactions. Therefore, the willingness of visitors to buy products in a B2B context might not accurately reflect consumer behaviour in a more varied or B2C-focused market.

Moreover, B2B markets often involve more complex decision-making processes and longer sales cycles compared to B2C markets. This difference could affect the applicability of the findings to broader market scenarios, where quick purchasing decisions and individual consumer preferences play a more significant role.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, affecting the accuracy of our results.

To address these limitations, future research should explore several key avenues. Firstly, expanding the sample to include a more diverse array of companies would be beneficial. This diversity should encompass not only different sectors but also a range of scopes and orientations, particularly incorporating more B2C companies. By doing so, future studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding of market dynamics and consumer behaviour, ensuring that the findings are more broadly applicable and reflective of diverse market scenarios. Such an approach would enhance the generalizability of the results, allowing for a more accurate and holistic understanding of the factors influencing purchasing decisions across various types of markets.

Second, investigating the role of storytelling in diverse cultural settings can shed light on how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of communication strategies during open-door events. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of strategic communication on visitor perceptions and subsequent behaviour would be valuable. These studies could examine how repeated interactions and evolving narratives affect brand loyalty and stakeholder trust over time.

Lastly, future research could explore the integration of technological advancements such as virtual reality tours and digital storytelling into industrial tourism to understand their potential for enhancing visitor engagement and satisfaction.

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The strategic role of communication in management and the contribution of corporate museums

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Abstract

Framing of the research: In today's hypercompetitive market scenario, where the relational dimension of strategies has become paramount for enterprises, corporate heritage has become an identity asset of highly distinctive effectiveness in communication processes, as it accredits the company in cultural and social terms and gives it a relevant competitive advantage over competitors.

Purpose of the paper: The paper aims to highlight corporate museums' potential as a tool for corporate communication and offers an overview of Italian corporate museums' current performance in this regard.

Methodology: The paper moves from the analysis of the main assumptions of the economic-managerial literature, with particular regard to the issue of the relational dimension of strategies and corporate communication on the one hand and corporate museums on the other. At the same time, it leverages an empirical survey conducted on Italian corporate museums.

Findings: While corporate museum management is highly aware of the potential of these institutions to direct all stakeholders for the enterprise's benefit, differences emerge regarding implementing the most effective strategies and tools to achieve all the value possible/optimize the value achievable.

Research limits: The main limitation of the research is the national sample size under investigation.

Practical implications: The paper aims to contribute to both the advancement of theoretical studies and managerial practice, including highlighting strategies and actions that can be implemented to improve the performance of corporate museums in terms of corporate communication.

Originality of the paper: The paper focuses on corporate museums' contribution to the strategic role of communication in management, approaching the topic from theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Key words: corporate communication; total relationship marketing; heritage marketing; corporate museum; Italian situation; museum service-output

1. Communication as a critical success factor

In today's market scenario, characterised by interdependence among open systems and increasing dynamism and complexity (i.e., variety, variability, and indeterminacy) (Golinelli, 2010), the relational dimension of strategies has become paramount for enterprises. In fact, since the 1970s, with society's shift from consumption linked to material primary needs to consumption linked to intangible desires, the marketing paradigm

has decisively veered from product to consumer, and the enterprise has become marketing-oriented (Stanton, 1984; Parasuraman, 1987; Guatri *et al.*, 1999): customer satisfaction is the primary goal of strategic choices (Rust and Zahorik, 1993; Anderson, 1998; Johnson and Gustafsson, 2000; Ferrero, 2013; Mattiacci and Pastore, 2013).

The relational approach to marketing (Grönroos, 1994, 2000; Gordon, 1998; Martini, 2000) first resets the relationship with end-consumers by shifting the sale from a *hic et nunc* fact to a medium/long-term loyalty dynamic with a view to lifetime value and customer retention (Gummesson, 1987; Sheth and Parvatlyar, 1995; Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Mithas *et al.*, 2005). Then, it focuses on governing the network of relationships and interaction with all possible internal and external stakeholders to influence their cognitive patterns and behaviours for their benefit and gain widespread consensus and legitimacy (Gummesson, 2008).

Within this framework, corporate communication, as the tool for governing the intra and inter-systemic relations of the company, has become not only a competitive necessity but a critical success factor and, indeed, a condition of survival (Varey, 2000; Zerfass, 2008, Nothhaft 2010; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Falkheimer, 2014; Invernizzi and Romenti, 2015;), and has also changed its contents and modalities to a significant degree (Steyn, 2002; Tench *et al.*, 2017). It is no longer enough to be concerned with product quality; dynamic and circular processes are needed to help create structural consonance and systemic resonance between the organisation and the relevant systems in its environment (Golinelli, 2010), procuring global accreditation of the enterprise.

In the marketplace, now understood as a conversation, visibility, distinctiveness, and reputation thus become imperative for competitive advantage, and corporate communication assumes a primary-essential role, as it is indispensable for defining and disseminating corporate image (Simcic Brønn, 2014). The latter is a concise representation of the company's identity, history and strategies, in other words, of the distinctive tangible and intangible resources that enable it to have competitive advantages (Balmer, 2001; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Kitchen *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it has become crucial in relational strategy based on two-way and enduring relationships. This intangible asset, thus, also takes priority for branding policies through which to make companies and products identifiable and actively contribute to their enhancement, ensuring that they meet consumers' expectations and attitudes, thus becoming a value in itself (brand equity) (Aaker, 2009; Christodoulides and De Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Siano *et al.*, 2022). For communication strategies to be effective in hypercompetitive market scenarios with a high rate of symbolic pollution, new marketing approaches and tools are needed. In particular, companies today must also address the issue of gaining widespread legitimacy by leveraging their social role and the impact, not only economic, that they have on larger or smaller communities (social, economic, technical and even cultural evolution of the community)¹ (Du

¹ This possibility stems from the recognition of enterprise as a factor not only of material well-being but also of civil and cultural progress since commonly used industrial activities and products are a material/tangible testimony of a

et al., 2010; Blombäck and Scandeliuss, 2013).

Considerable influence, therefore, lies with heritage marketing (Misiura, 2006; Montemaggi and Severino, 2007; Balmer, 2013; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021) and total relationship heritage marketing (Montella, 2018). The communication of the heritage accumulated by a company as a result not only of its internal experiences (endogenous resources), but also of what it has drawn from its reference context (exogenous resources-rootedness in the territory), as well as of the benefits that the company has brought about for a wide range of stakeholders², has assumed primary relevance in defining, qualifying and enhancing corporate identity, image and brand (Urde *et al.*, 2007; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014; Rindell *et al.*, 2015; Rose *et al.*, 2016; Balmer, 2017; Balmer, Chen, 2017; Burghausen, 2022).

Thus, this cultural heritage has become an identity asset of highly distinctive effectiveness in communication processes, accrediting the company in cultural and social terms and bringing a relevant competitive advantage over competitors.

This assumption is even more valid considering that globalisation processes must necessarily be approached with “glocal” logic (Svensson, 2001). Demand, which is increasingly oriented toward non-standardised goods and services and attracted above all by the intangible and, in particular, symbolic and cultural characteristics of the offer, recognises the traditional character of companies and products (centuries-old training, longevity³ and local typicality⁴) as having a clear distinctive value, a high index of reliability and undergoes considerable emotional involvement.

The opportunity to articulate total relationship marketing as total relationship heritage marketing was recognised by companies well in advance of theoretical elaborations. Indeed, since the 1960s, many companies have implemented heritage branding and retro-branding policies through the adaptation of historical brands to the tastes of today’s consumers and they have equipped themselves with various heritage marketing tools (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Garofano *et al.*, 2020), from the use of storytelling to publishing institutional monographs, organising events, developing specific merchandising, reintroducing old, successful products

community’s way of life (skills, knowledge, needs and desires, customs, values, available resources, etc.) and at the same time intervene in the formation of social values. This aspect can directly relate to the wellness theme in the original meaning of well-being, replacing the dominant 20th-century meaning of welfare. Thus, a well-being based on relationships rather than ownership/possession of goods and that is included in total relationship marketing (Montella, 2018).

² This theme is all the more relevant for our context given the inimitable competitive advantage that the image capital, Italy, enjoys also reverberates on the corporate image of the companies that operate there, and all the more so when the prestige contributes to their reputation due both to the longevity they can boast and to the external economies inherent in the territorial spheres in which they operate and in which Italy’s rich cultural geography is articulated.

³ See in particular: Giarretta, 2004; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Zellweger and Astrachan, 2008; Corbetta and Salvato 2012; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2016; De Falco and Vollero, 2015; Cerquetti *et al.*, 2022.

⁴ See in particular: Napolitano and De Nisco, 2017; Spielmann *et al.*, 2019; Montella and Silvestrelli, 2020.

in an updated form, participating in historical business associations, establishing foundations, and, most importantly, organising archives and establishing corporate museums⁵.

Building on these theoretical assumptions, if properly designed and managed, corporate museums appear to be one of the most effective corporate communication tools available to a company.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the role and potential of corporate museums in strategic communication?

RQ2: What is the current performance of Italian corporate museums in this regard?

2. Communicating through the corporate museum

Corporate museums⁶, which can be defined as museums established, governed and financed by a company to create its own narrative identity (Montella, 2018), are optimal for implementing total relationship marketing strategies by leveraging the company's overall heritage. This contributes significantly to identifying the enterprise and its products, distinguishing it from competitors, inducing a favourable opinion, and making its effective emotional and symbolic appeal felt for a long time.

The importance of such institutions as communication tools for strengthening the relational capital of a company, establishing its image also from a cultural and social point of view and enhancing its reputation and brand for the achievement of widespread consensus and legitimacy (Griffiths, 1999; Gilodi, 2002; Montella, 2010; Castellani and Rossato, 2014; Piatkowska, 2014; Liggeri, 2015; Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Montella, 2018; Iannone and De Chiara, 2019; Pulh *et al.*, 2019; Simone *et al.*, 2022; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021 and 2022), has been recognised by companies well in advance of business scholars, as evidenced by their increasing diffusion already since the second half of the last century in Europe and then in Italy⁷.

⁵ Assolombarda (2003) pointed out that the corporate museum can become a flywheel to characterise the more or less long history of a company's production and, with it, respond to marketing policies. History can thus become an element of promotion since it is corporate culture and it increases the confidence of potential customers who knows they are dealing with a company rich with experience.

⁶ Corporate museums should be distinguished from other organisation units, such as archives, collections of objects far from the core business of the company to which they belong, and foundations without permanent collections. Each of these, in fact, involves profound differences in their mission and, therefore, their managerial implications.

⁷ In Italy, the phenomenon has been slower and more contained than in countries such as Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, reaching its peak in the 1980s and 1990s and affecting mainly the "industrial triangle" of the Northeast, in line with the country's entrepreneurial history.

The corporate museum is an optimal storytelling tool (Hansen and Kahnweiller, 1993; Fontana, 2013; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2016; Salmon, 2017) for telling a company's story from a wide range of perspectives (Coleman, 1943; Cohen and Bacdayan, 1994; Stein, 1995; Kinni, 1999; Montemaggi and Severino, 2007; Martino, 2013; Solima, 2015; Montella, 2018), and making explicit the multidimensional value of its overall heritage.

To this end, the museum can highlight the main distinctive aspects of the enterprise, such as:

- products, production processes and advertising campaigns, highlighting their features and material and intangible and notably symbolic and cultural characteristics (e.g. historical importance, ethical and possibly aesthetic quality);
- the wealth of knowledge (know-how);
- values and symbolic essence, including corporate culture and corporate social responsibility;
- rootedness in the territory: i) the tangible and intangible resources drawn by the company from the reference context; ii) the positive externalities generated by the company for the social, economic, technical and even cultural evolution of the community; iii) the company's links with other local institutions and activities;
- longevity, as evidence of the company's ability to establish long-term virtuous ties with all stakeholders, follow balanced growth and keeping in tune with the evolution of the needs expressed by society.

The museum can express the content of the communication through texts and metatexts and by using multisensory codes (visual, aural, tactile). Traditional and proven tools the museum can make use of include the display of objects, graphics, photos and written documents; the use of audiovisuals; fixed communication apparatus such as captions and information panels; publications of various kinds (Martino, 2013) from catalogues, which would constitute a business monograph (Magagnino and Foroni, 2010), to short guides and brochures; guided tours; lectures and seminars; and temporary exhibitions.

In addition, it can use technological supports (Leoni and Cristofaro, 2021), digital forms of communication and special events of various kinds. It can also engage in social media (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2013), feed the corporate website (Vallini, 2005) and disseminate commercials. Moreover, corporate museums can implement distribution initiatives (circulation of self-made exhibits, loan of objects to exhibitions and fairs promoted by others) and actively participate in associations that network historical enterprises nationally and internationally (e.g. Museimpresa⁸).

⁸ The Associazione Italiana Archivi e Musei d'Impresa, promoted by Assolombarda and Confindustria, was founded in Milan in 2001 to identify, network and offer visibility to companies that have chosen to prioritise their cultural heritage within their communication strategies" and proposing to promote the "concept of corporate cultural responsibility" and to "foster the exchange of knowledge and experiences between the museum community, businesses, cultural institutions and the general public." As of June 2023, it brings together more than 100 museums and archives of large, medium and

Finally, it should be kept in mind that communications conveyed by the museum are articulated in meta-levels: the first concerns the museum itself (i.e., the capital stock of which it is made) and its activities; the second relates to the identity and values of the company to which it refers.

Therefore, the managerial and organisational perspectives of the corporate museum (exhibit design, information facilities, contact personnel, visual identity, and all other communication tools) should reflect the corporate identity to deliver a consistent message and induce mental associations in the visitor that refer to the company (Casagrande, 2000). Furthermore, these should be part of the corporate integrated marketing communication programme, ensuring that all forms and messages of communication implemented are carefully tied together to communicate the predefined message and establish in the consumers' minds the desired corporate reputation and image (Belch and Belch, 2018; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2022). More specifically, all museum layout and management choices should be designed to be as effective and efficient as possible in isolation (micro perspective) and simultaneously harmonised with all of the company's promotion tools (macro perspective) (Keller, 2013).

As a result of the prerogatives highlighted, specific to media expressly aimed at qualitative returns, the public is enabled to identify the company in its economic and social context and to distinguish it from its competitors, to conceive a favourable opinion of it, and feel its effective emotional and symbolic appeal for a long time⁹.

2.2 Museum communication effectiveness

The corporate museum is a particularly effective communication tool.

First of all, it should be considered that the target communicator of the corporate museum is very composite (Martino, 2010): the messages conveyed through it reach a broad and heterogeneous audience, including all the user types mentioned in the literature on corporate institutional communication: governments, influence groups, media, general public, local communities, business sectors, financial sectors, customers, competitors, internal-employee audiences¹⁰. The museum also allows the

small Italian companies (www.museimpresa.com).

⁹ This is in accordance with the traditional response levels of the potential customer to the information/stimuli used by the salesperson (Lambin and Schuiling, 2012): *cognitive-type response*, consequent to the explicit communication about the company's historical data and facts and with implicit constant reference to its corporate identity; *affective-type response*, resulting to the tacit work of persuasion and "seduction" exercised by the museum, which therefore becomes a fundamental and load-bearing element of the company's image; and *behavioural-type response*, consequent to the satisfaction of the museum experience that determines in the minds of visitors a strengthening of the company's reputation positively influencing their future purchasing choices.

¹⁰ As is well known, these target audiences are further segmented into (i) residents, authorities, community bodies, educational institutions; (ii) influencers on specific issues (activists, opinion formers, academics, educators, specific groups); (iii) distributors and suppliers; (iv) government offices and agencies, state agencies; (v) publishing, radio, television; (vi) shareholders and

company to approach multiple clusters of actual and potential consumers with one-to-one marketing; moreover, they could be reached remotely by conveying the museum offer through digital resources. Finally, it enables the implementation of differentiated (and possibly focused) communication to engage different categories of stakeholders, internal and external.

Furthermore, as a cultural communication institution with a centuries-old tradition and high symbolic prestige¹¹, the museum allows for the development of cultural activities closely related to the company's core business, thus generating greater added value than other investments in culture¹².

Moreover, unlike sponsorships, which seek to capture the public's attention in a mediated form since this should bounce back from an event to the supporting company, with the corporate museum the company directly assumes the role of issuer of a message that reaches the recipients immediately, optimising communication processes. Consider also that in the museum, the processes of encoding and decoding messages take place under conditions of minimal noise, and the environment is specially designed to connect the visitor with material heritage documents and facilitate the immersivity, experientiality, interactivity, dynamism and storytelling that have become the new buzzwords (Stogner, 2009). Corporate museums, free from the meritorious constraints placed on public museums, also offer an excellent field of application for experiential marketing (Livingstone, 2011; Zena and Hadisumarto, 2013; Pulh *et al.*, 2019): for entertainment goals and the theatricalization of the offer, they can also leverage the peripheral components of the offer, the tangible atmospherics (furnishings, materials, ICT instrumentation to support the visit, etc.) and the intangible ones (lights, colours, smells, music, etc.) and entertainment strategies pursued through events and performances.

At the same time, the visitor, as a conscious user, is placed in a particularly favourable state of mind, mitigating their critical barriers in favour of an emotional involvement that stimulates interest and attention

individual investors, banks, institutional investors, pension funds, investment funds, insurance companies, brokers, financial analysts; (vii) general public.

¹¹ The *International Council of Museums (ICOM)* in 2022 defined the museum as follows: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

¹² In a nutshell, investments in culture are used by companies to reach a different and broader audience than their target market and to reverberate the public's acceptance of the initiative on themselves. As illustrated by Gilodi (2002), direct investments concern the interventions made by a profit-driven company with its products in the cultural market (such as "artistic objects" produced, for example, by Swatch, Alessi, Versace with copyright design and limited edition, which become collector's items, or such as goods/services instrumental to the enjoyment of cultural objects and/or activities, such as publishing, restoration, and provision of services). On the other hand, indirect interventions contemplate the provision by an enterprise of funds or services in favor of a cultural product made by others to obtain image returns and, therefore, economic benefits (such as cultural sponsorships and the establishment of foundations).

to the exhibited materials and related messages, as well as the formation of a lasting memory. All this fosters behavioural and mental “brand loyalty” from a lifetime value perspective.

Lastly, the museum can implement company market surveys by administering questionnaires to visitors (on-site and remote) to survey satisfaction, expectations and preferences, which are helpful for effective fine-tuning with consumers and for immediate feedback.

2.3 Museum communication benefits

The corporate museum can optimally achieve all the benefits envisaged in the literature about corporate communication and related to increasing the company’s relational capital by establishing and consolidating lasting and bidirectional relationships with all stakeholders by leveraging the company’s heritage. While all these benefits relate to gaining widespread acceptance, they can be segmented into internal and external benefits.

Internal benefits follow organisational purposes concerning corporate culture’s consolidation and intra-systemic dissemination¹³. The museum, in fact, can be an excellent tool to recognise and express at its best this essential factor for organisational cohesion and derive all possible positive effects from it. In particular, if properly used, the museum can positively affect the corporate climate, helping to foster and strengthen internal relations and motivate staff, increasing their sense of belonging and making them feel a part of the expected performance (Casey, 1997; Griffiths, 1999; Argote, 2012). In addition, the museum can contribute to the continuous evolution of corporate culture following changes in the enterprise’s environment. Doing this will prevent it from being considered according to a rigid conservative attitude and becoming a constraint. Therefore, corporate museum planning and management choices (from organisational to strategic ones) should also be conceived according to internal stakeholders.

External benefits result from the definition, dissemination, and strengthening of corporate identity, image, brand and reputation and pertain to the influence in favour of the company of external stakeholders’ cognitive patterns and behaviours. In particular, the museum can be an excellent tool for customer expansion and retention, fostering lasting emotional involvement and trust. The postmodern customer, indeed, is increasingly attracted by the intangible and mainly symbolic and cultural characteristics of the offer and productive organisations, whose appreciation significantly depends on the explication of the heritage embedded in them and their role in the evolution of the community. Equally crucial is obtaining legitimacy and consensus from all relevant context entities (primarily the local political-administrative and socio-economic systems), which greatly influence the organisation’s life and long-term survival. Under an increasingly widespread demand for sustainability and the inescapable assumptions of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), consensus increasingly depends on new and peculiar requirements of a

¹³ Corporate culture results from the interactive set of values, stories and cognitions shared by its internal participants (Gerloff, 1993; Schein, 1998).

proper ethical nature concerning the impact of economic circuits on society and the environment and thus extended also to the preservation of the ecosystem in the totality of its social, natural, and cultural components. When effectively set up and managed according to these objectives, the museum can significantly contribute to them not only as a tool of institutional communication but also by illustrating the socially responsible and sustainable behaviour of the company, as well as directly performing public relations by representing the company as a cultural reference and acting in its name and on its behalf as an institutional mediator.

Finally, in addition to all this, the corporate museum can significantly contribute to local development, making the company's rootedness in the territory explicit, strengthening community identity, and increasing the income differential for the entire territorial economic-productive system. In particular, it can offer valid support to territorial marketing, the increase and enhancement of the tourist offer - above all by targeting the specific cluster attracted by the industrial heritage - the enhancement of productivity and the image of local museum networks, and the development and support of socio-cultural activities through the hosting of local events (Montella, 2018).

3. Empirical investigation

3.1 Methodology

The empirical survey was addressed to 94 identified corporate museums in Italy¹⁴ (the survey universe), obtaining a response rate of 53.19% (50 museums constitute the survey sample).

The research objectives were to be empirically verified:

- The awareness level of the management of Italian corporate museums concerning the potential of these institutions as communication tools;
- The way museums are managed to achieve these goals, with particular reference to communication content (messages), materials displayed, communication means, and delivery methods used.

The survey, quali-quantitative and responding to exploratory purposes, was conducted in the first half of 2019 and updated in 2022 through a questionnaire administered by email and completed mainly by persons with primary responsibility in the museum (56%: director, curator, conservator, manager, coordinator)¹⁵. When necessary, the researcher also conducted telephone interviews with museum contacts.

From a structural point of view, therefore, the questionnaire was divided into two sections.

A. General data

- Location

¹⁴ To identify corporate museums as defined in Section 2, see Simone *et al.*, 2022.

¹⁵ This is followed by figures from the company's marketing/communications/external relations department (16%); company president/administrator (6%); company (and, therefore, museum) owner, museum foundation president, museum secretarial staff (4% each); other (4%); unspecified (6%).

- Legal status
- Users
- B. Museum and corporate communication
 - Museum's potential to illustrate, disseminate and consolidate corporate identity, image and reputation
 - Communication contents
 - Materials on display
 - Communication means and modes

The questionnaire includes closed (dichotomous or multiple-choice) and open-ended questions. The latter are instrumental in cases where one does not want to influence the answer given by the museum contact person in any way, leaving instead the possibility to express in the desired way and offering all the appropriate details and clarifications, and, if it were excessively long, to list all the possible options.

The responses obtained were computed in a specially constructed database. Then, to facilitate the analysis of the survey results, a numerical value was uniquely assigned to each response option¹⁶. Finally, the data for each item were analysed, following the best-suited methods for each of the three possible types of responses. Notably, the sum of positive and negative responses was chosen for the dichotomous responses. In the other cases (namely open or multiple-choice questions), frequency detection and statistical processing such as mean and mode calculation were used.

3.2 Results

General Data

Most museums are located within the company premises (60%) or close to it (18%). A few are distant from corporate facilities (14%), and even fewer are located in disused establishments (8%).

These institutes are mainly devoid of legal autonomy (74%)¹⁷ and configured as operating units dependent on the marketing and communication area (34%) or directly on top management (34%)¹⁸.

As for annual visitors, most museums (24%) have up to 1,000, although half are at most 500. Slightly fewer (20%) are those between 5,000 and 10,000 visitors¹⁹. The users are mainly tourists and students (respectively

¹⁶ Closed questions: a) dichotomous responses: yes=1/no=0; b) multiple choice options: numerical value between 1 and n.; 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) to measure the degree of agreement or disagreement with a particular question or statement.

Open-ended questions: first, a comparative analysis was done to infer the basic constants by which they could be divided into standard categories and to record any exceptions to themselves; then, these response categories were quantified (Corbetta, 1999), that is, the variables that emerged were coded by assigning a precise numerical value to each.

¹⁷ Museums with a legal status (26%) are generally established as foundations (20%), followed by associations, S.r.l. (LLC) and S.s.i.u. (2% each).

¹⁸ The remainder depends on the production division, research and development or the Human Resources Department (2% each).

¹⁹ In addition, 18% range from 1,000 to 5,000 visitors, 12% from 10,000 to 50,000

34% and 33% of the public on average), followed by traders/employees (17%), residents (8%) and company employees (6%)²⁰.

Museums and corporate communication

Of the high importance of the museum as an additional corporate communication tool, the majority of respondents are well aware, stating that it was created to preserve the tangible and intangible identity heritage of the target company and enhance it through attractive storytelling²¹.

The museums surveyed aim to communicate the firm-specific heritage by illustrating, first and foremost, the company's history²², including its values, longevity, product evolution, production process technologies, knowledge heritage, and brand and business communication evolution.

The illustration of the firm's rootedness in the local context and the exchangeable enterprise-territory benefits is also highly important. In particular, the majority of respondents assert the positive impact of the local context on business activities²³, clarifying how the territory has contributed to shaping the company's products and production processes (as a source of material and intangible resources stratified over centuries and therefore decisive for the company's success as inimitable or difficult to imitate) and often the name itself. The illustration of the positive impact by the enterprise on the socio-economic and even cultural development of the territory is also considered quite important²⁴.

Also high is the importance most attached to illustrating the full range of value of the products and processes of the reference company²⁵, highlighting their tangible and intangible characteristics. In particular, museums aim to make visitors appreciate their heritage for their historical and socio-cultural values, not limiting to its commodity and technical values (e.g. physical characteristics, technological profiles). To this end, they recount its development through the centuries (materials and production process, forms, uses, and so on) and relate it to the social, economic, and cultural changes that have occurred in the context, beginning with the local context.

The importance of the museum as a tool for communicating corporate social responsibility²⁶ is somewhat recognised as well as demonstrating to

and 8% from 50,000 to 100,000. Only 2% exceed 100,000. The remaining 16% were unable to quantify their annual audience.

²⁰ The remaining 2% are the company's clients and guests of meetings organised by outside companies.

²¹ This aspect is of high importance for 40% of museums, highest for 36%, fair for 14%, low for 8%, and none for 2%.

²² This aspect is of highest importance for 42%, high for 26%, fair for 18%, low for 6%, and none for 8%.

²³ This aspect is of highest or high importance for 28% of museums (each), fair for 24%, low for 4%, and none for 16%.

²⁴ This aspect is of fair importance for 24%, high for 22%, low for 16%, highest for 14%, and none for 24%.

²⁵ This aspect is of high importance for 44% of museums, highest for 18%, fair for 12%, low for 14%, and none for 12%.

²⁶ This aspect is of high importance for 26% of cases, highest for 24%, fair for 18%, none for 18%, and low for 14%.

stakeholders the attention that the company pays to respect the environment and common goods in general, its commitment to the quality of the urban environment, and the investments made in culture, social activities, sports, etc. In some cases, the museum also becomes an opportunity to highlight the care devoted by the company to the design and implementation of satisfactory working environments.

The use of museums to disseminate and consolidate corporate culture, fostering employees' feelings of belonging and motivation, is considered very important²⁷. To this end, museums offer testimonies of yesterday's and today's workers and illustrate the company's past and present activities for its employees (welfare, recreational, leisure, socialising, educational and cultural activities).

To communicate these aspects, museums display company products (94%), archival documents and historical photographs and/or films (84%), technical drawings and prototypes (76%), tools and machinery (68%), and, in some cases, historical merchandising (packaging, labels, advertising material, and so on) (24%).

As for how the communication service is provided, exhibits are generally accompanied by information supports in the tour route (62%), such as textual tools (captions, panels), technological apparatus (audiovisual, computer or multimedia) and guided tours. Less frequent are the use of brochures or printed guides (56%), special exhibition sections (38%), catalogues and publications (32%) and temporary exhibitions (30%). In addition, a large proportion of the museums surveyed say they use differentiation of offerings (78%), offering multiple visit routes and/or multiple levels of reading of exhibits functional to communicating a specific aspect or satisfying a specific cluster of users. Less frequent (36%) is the use of spectacularization of the offer for experiential marketing purposes, leveraging tangible and intangible atmospherics, digital technologies, entertainment strategies, immersiveness, experientiality, interactivity, dynamism and storytelling. Some museums, for example, focus on highly scenic displays (18%), organise special events (12%), display objects of particular rarity and/or produce reconstructions (10%) or choose venues of particular archaeological-industrial and/or historical-artistic interest (8%). The museums surveyed contribute to corporate communication through distribution and promotion policies and establishing and strengthening the company's ties with the local area and other national players. Generally, high importance is given to promotion²⁸, especially using multimedia channels (websites, social media, as well as mailing lists and newsletters) (92%) and the press (76%). Less frequent are distribution policies implemented through the production of travelling exhibitions and/or set up in other venues (42%), and the loan of its objects to exhibitions and fairs promoted by other entities (66%).

²⁷ This aspect is of high importance for 28% of museums, highest for 26%, fair for 20%, low for 20%, and none for 6%. Understandably, it is less important in micro and small businesses, whose employees are almost always overwhelmingly the owners themselves.

²⁸ This aspect is of high importance for 42% of museums, highest for 24%, fair for 20%, low for 10% and none for 4%.

Also considered quite important is the strengthening of relations with other local institutions and activities²⁹: first and foremost, public authorities (42%), but also other museums and historical-artistic attractions (18%), cultural organisations (16%), and educational institutions (12%)³⁰. To this end, the involvement in the local socio-economic reality³¹ and participating in events or other initiatives for the promotion of the territory is very relevant (72%), perhaps offering for the occasion extraordinary openings, guided tours, complementary exhibitions, as well as joining associations (56%) of local or national character, first of all, Museimpresa (44%). On the other hand, the declared commitment of the museums surveyed to provide information on local cultural heritage³² (other museums in the area and various heritage), making maps of the city, brochures and information leaflets available to their users and/or making use of their website is limited (10%).

4. Discussion

In the light of the theoretical assumptions described and the empirical analysis conducted, the corporate museum turns out to be an effective tool for conveying the elements suitable for the formation of such a positive perception of the company in the public's mind that it largely contributes to the creation of a favourable relational context in the long run. Indeed, the museum constitutes the synthesis of the company's many distinctive resources (tangible and intangible) and its tangible testimonies, that is, the firm-specific cultural capital. Therefore, it constitutes the speaking manifesto used to account to all the company's stakeholders not only the material elements of the company's products but also the symbolic and notably cultural values embedded in them and in the company's history, as well as of corporate policies based on values that are ethical and on the willingness for the preservation, enhancement and development of the local context.

Therefore:

- The corporate museum assumes full strategic importance in the entrepreneurial management's performance as the perfect bearer of an image surplus value responding to the primary need to strengthen the company's reputation also from a cultural and social point of view by implementing communication strategies that achieve global accreditation of the company;
- It should be recognised as an additional, effective corporate communication tool for management. It constitutes, in fact, an

²⁹ This aspect is of high importance for 36% of cases, fair for 26%, highest for 18%, none for 12% and low for 8%.

³⁰ In rare cases, museums have ties with tour operators and Confindustria (4% each), trade unions, suppliers, banking institutions, MIBACT and local people (2 each).

³¹ High importance is found in 28% of museums, highest in 14%, fair in 22%, low in 16% and none in 20%.

³² This aspect is of no importance for 40% of museums, fair for 18%, low for 16%, high for 14%, and highest for 12%.

additional operational lever commensurate with distinct objectives and specific modes of operation, capable of dialoguing with all corporate functions and representing the company in different institutional and territorial settings.

Its effectiveness implies a strong consistency between corporate identity and the message conveyed by the museum and, therefore, a strong coordination and an integrated approach between the corporate museum and other marketing communication tools.

However, the empirical analysis shows that corporate museums' contribution to strategic communication in the current Italian context could be more significant.

In fact, although managers state that they attach great importance to such institutions as a corporate communication tool, attesting to a high and widespread awareness by companies about the potential of the corporate museum, there appear to be differences among Italian institutions, especially regarding implementing the most effective strategies and tools to achieve the possible strategic effects. In particular, too many institutions are still not sufficiently attentive in communicating the main aspects related to the corporate heritage that would allow them to generate the full multidimensional value and, above all, they underestimate the importance of the appropriate tools to actually obtain the benefits related to each of these. Indeed, shortcomings regarding the range of information and tools to support the visit are frequently noted. For most corporate museums, the difference between offering a service of simple physical accessibility to exhibition rooms and full intellectual accessibility to what is shown and told is not so clear. It is almost as if the mere display of objects is enough to convey the desired messages. Too often, confusing output with stock, they limit themselves to displaying objects that substantiate their collection, believing that this is sufficient to convey the messages they want to communicate. Strengthening the service of communicating historical information about the objects on display - with particular regard to the content of the communication (messages), the media of the communication, and the modes of delivery used - thus appears as the central aspect that needs to be enhanced to enable museums to optimize their contribution to strategic communication.

Margins for improvement are also noted regarding the promotion and especially the distribution policies implemented by corporate museums to contribute to corporate communication, as well as actions aimed at fostering stronger ties with the local area (cultural heritage, institutions, activities, communities).

5. Conclusion

The paper's findings hold implications for theoretical studies and the advancement of managerial practice, underscoring the importance of our research in the academic and corporate spheres.

First, in light of the economic-managerial literature mainly referred to the strategic role of corporate communication and marketing approaches

and tools that enable broad and sustained engagement of all corporate stakeholders by leveraging the cultural dimension of the company (TRHM) (§ 1) and related to the corporate museum (§ 2), the study highlights and justifies the relevant role and potential of corporate museums as a powerful corporate communication tool aimed at achieving widespread consensus, pointing out some main aspects:

- strategies and actions to be developed to improve the performance of this tool, with particular regard to the communication content considered as a priority, the materials displayed, the communication media, and the delivery methods used (§ 2.1);
- the particular effectiveness of corporate museums (§ 2.3);
- the main benefits achievable inside and outside the organisation (§ 2.3).

Moreover, the research offers insight into the current performance of Italian corporate museums in terms of corporate communication, pointing out the main strengths and weaknesses (§ 3 and 4).

Important managerial implications flow from this.

Indeed, the paper contributes to making production organizations and corporate museum managers increasingly aware of the following:

- the strategic communicative role of these institutions;
- the management guidelines and practices to improve the performance of this tool.

The national size of the sample under investigation constitutes the main limitation of the paper. However, it is a starting point for future research to enrich this field of study with empirical evidence belonging to contexts other than Italy. In addition, subsequent research could develop strategies with clear objectives, targets (or buyer personas), content, KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and metrics to measure the effectiveness of the content strategy of corporate museums. Still, the level of responsiveness between the communication implemented by corporate museums and the IMC approach could be investigated by verifying to what extent the activities developed and the tools used are coherently connected, as well as with other marketing communication activities (offline and online) of the company.

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The strategic role of communication in management and the contribution of corporate museums

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Charting the ‘Lunar Alignment’ in today’s media landscape: Exploring perceptions of Italian strategic communicators and journalists in a mediatized world

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Abstract

Research context: Over the past thirty years, shifts in strategic communication and journalism have altered how communicators and journalists interact. With content creation and news writing central to capturing attention and building relationships, their functions are increasingly overlapping.

Purpose of the study: This study explores how Italian strategic communicators and journalists perceive their own and each other’s identities and functions in the current Italian media landscape. It investigates how these professionals respond to mediatization and how this, in turn, has supported mutual positive relationships.

Methodology: Through expert interviews, this study adopts an exploratory approach to examine the perspectives of strategic communicators versus those of journalists on questions of professional identity, roles, working practices, relationships, and professional challenges.

Results: The perceptions of professional identities and roles in strategic communication and journalism have evolved, while the growing mediatization of practices among strategic communicators has enhanced journalists’ perceptions of relationships. There is a noticeable convergence in the skills and competencies of these professionals, alongside a mutual recognition of the importance of high-quality information.

Research limitations: This study is exploratory and conducted with a small sample size. Due to the qualitative nature of the findings, they cannot be generalized.

Practical implications and originality of the study: The study addresses a gap in research with a country-specific focus and sheds light on mediatization effects on professional identities.

Keywords: Professional identity, perceptions, media changes, mediatization, strategic communication, journalism, Italy

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a significant transformation has occurred in the field of communication, marked by the increasing integration and transboundary roles of communication across organizational functions (Invernizzi, 2000; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). Strategic communication has become more significant, highlighting the expansion and merging of

numerous communication activities (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014). The influence of media on organizations, shaped by varied media logics, has significantly affected both internal and external communications, covering areas such as marketing, branding, public relations, community, and institutional relations (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017; Ihlen and Pallas, 2014; Pallas *et al.*, 2016).

Digital information technologies, especially the widespread use of platforms like social media, have significantly influenced strategic communication (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023). The democratization of communications through these platforms and the emergence of automated communication tools challenge traditional concepts of organizational control and the role of strategic communication (Badham *et al.*, 2022). Even once considered essential, media relations activities have undergone substantial changes (Tkalac Verčič and Colić, 2016; Verhoeven, 2016; Wilson and Supa, 2013; Zerfass and Schramm, 2014). Similarly, journalism has witnessed substantial changes, transitioning from print and electronic broadcasting to becoming more digitalized (Jamil, 2023). This digital transformation has affected news production and dissemination through the Internet and mobile devices, impacting public perceptions of journalism's professionalism and credibility (Zelizer, 2019). As content creation and news writing become key for capturing attention and fostering relationships, the roles of communication professionals and journalists are increasingly converging (Werder *et al.*, 2023).

Departing from the notion of increased mediatization of corporate content, the study explores how Italian communication professionals and journalists perceive their own and each other's roles in this changing media landscape. Italy was selected because the line between strategic communication and journalism is often blurred, with professionals frequently moving between these fields (Valentini, 2014). Additionally, Italy was chosen due to a lack of empirical studies on mediatization, and how these professions are viewed compared to other nations (Arqoub and Dwikat, 2023). News reporting, cultural values, informal relations, and unwritten rules, as well as the history and development of the strategic communication profession, are factors that make country-specific studies such as this very important, as findings from other contexts are not necessarily generalizable.

To address this gap, the study conducts expert interviews, providing qualitative insights into the perceptions of those working in strategic communication and journalism. It adopts an exploratory approach to examine the perspectives of communication professionals and journalists, emphasizing the significance of social representations (Moscovici, 1984) when exploring the perceptions of professionals regarding their own and other's professions. Professional and societal cultures are considered as lenses through which individuals make sense of their professional identities (Weick, 1995). While the findings may not represent the entire spectrum of these professionals, the study provides empirical evidence on how these two professions are adapting to mediatization and how mediatization is supporting mutual positive relationships.

2. Literature review

Converging professions: Strategic communicators and journalists' functions and relationships

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A classical definition of strategic communication describes it as “all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organizations to address any kind of stakeholders and audiences” (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018, p. 488). Strategic communication has emerged in response to dynamic changes in society, organizations, and technology in today’s evolving communication landscape. Zerfass *et al.* (2018) contend that this transformation is a response to the pressing need for an aligned integration of diverse communication functions, strategically orchestrated to realize organizational objectives. Similarly, Invernizzi and Romenti (2011) advocate for a paradigm shift towards a heightened strategic phase of communication within organizations. They posit that communication is assuming an increasingly pivotal role as an intrinsic value intertwined with core organizational functions, thereby becoming instrumental in supporting essential business activities crucial for the resilience and growth of organizations. Strategic communication can also create new value for organizations, such as helping organizations align, energize, envision, and constitute their legitimacy (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014). Yet, many strategic communicators are trained in public relations activities and start their careers in newsrooms of news media or corporate side. Thus, naturally, media relations is one of the key activities they perform but not the only one (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014; Simonsson and Heide, 2021).

There are many definitions of journalism, and agreement on what it truly is today seems to be lacking (Shapiro, 2014) due to the blurred lines between journalism and other types of public communication (Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Many consider journalism a profession that offers an accurate portrayal of the modern world, delivering new information based on facts, or opinions derived from those facts (Conboy 2013). Journalists rely on diverse information sources, including organizational communicators, resulting in regular interactions between these communication professionals.

Historically, studies across various countries highlighted tensions between journalists and these communicators-who were often referred to as public relations-, stemming from their inherent antagonism (Arqoub and Dwikat, 2023; DeLorme and Fedler, 2003) and the complex relationships between PR practitioners and journalists. Misunderstandings and stereotypes led to adversarial relationships as both professions sought to differentiate their roles (Yun and Yoon, 2011). These professionals are often distinguished by their communication “culture” (Weder *et al.*, 2023), though they are considered “two sides of the same coin” (Evans, 2010). The relationship has been described as “love-hate”, associated with the communicative difference between public relations professionals and journalists as senders or receivers, the interdependence of roles as source or reporter, incompatibility of goals as source’s advocacy or reporter’s pursuit for objectivity and consequences for each other (Shin and Cameron, 2004).

However, later research has highlighted a change in these perceptions, showing less adversarial views towards one another (Neijens and Smit, 2006; Weder *et al.*, 2023).

These perceptions result from interactions and direct experiences, besides ethics and professionalism. Changes in the relationship between strategic communicators and journalists reflect shifts in strategic communication, and journalism practices over the last thirty years. The commercialization of media markets and the competition for audience attention and advertising revenue have negatively impacted news content (McManus 2009). Market-driven news production tends to favor personalized debates, oversimplified issues, and polarized conflicts (Aalberg *et al.*, 2010; Curran 2011). Journalists frequently focus on established sources and competing policy agendas while neglecting diverse reporting (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). This deterioration in quality can foster public cynicism (Blumler and Cushion 2014; Jebril *et al.*, 2013), particularly in online news media under pressure to produce low-cost content with less-experienced staff (Redden and Witschge 2010). Economic pressures and the dominance of publicly owned corporations have made the industry more market-driven (Tsetsura, 2021; Curtin, 1997), prompting journalists to seek opportunities in the corporate sector and facilitating mediatization processes within organizations. A clear example of such contamination is, in fact, the increasing mediatization of corporate content (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017; Ihlen and Pallas, 2014; Pallas *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, the demand for information services from communicators has risen in the media industry (Jo, 2003). To meet this growing need, communication professionals are producing more media-like corporate content (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017), possibly requiring more journalists to become communicators (Viererbl and Koch, 2021). Hence the communicator's professional role as a source of information, an influencer of media agenda, and a provider of information subsidies (Shin and Cameron, 2003; Tkalac Verčič and Colić, 2016; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2017) has substantially increased, in part because of journalism changes.

3. Mediatization of communications

Technological advancements have brought both opportunities and challenges to strategic communication and journalism (Jamil, 2023; Wilson and Supa, 2013). Expectations arise that these interactions may influence the institutional logic guiding the practices of communication professionals and journalists (Pang *et al.*, 2014). Strategic communications have increasingly embraced digitalization (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023) and become more mediatized to align with the media logic necessary for gaining visibility in the public domain (Wiesenberg and Tench, 2020). Mediatization pertains to the increasing incorporation of media into society and the dependency on its intrinsic mechanisms (Hjarvard 2014). In simpler terms, mediatization explains how media transformations influence activities, organizations, institutions, and society, while also illustrating how media itself evolves via human interactions (Fredriksson

and Pallas, 2020). Mediatization studies in the context of strategic communication have addressed questions related to both the pressure media exerts on an organization and the process by which organizations adapt their communication activities to accommodate and manage these media pressures strategically (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2020; Salomonsen *et al.*, 2016). Scholars have observed that while research on this topic frequently examines mediatization's impacts, it rarely explores how agents create, maintain, alter, or disrupt it (Pallas and Fredriksson, 2013).

The extant literature on agents' contributions to the mediatization of corporate content has revolved around understanding professionals' competencies and roles in the process of strategic communication transformation (Laursen and Valentini, 2015; Poulsen, 2022). Wiesenbergh and Tench (2020), for instance, studied organizational leaders' knowledge and usage of social bots as part of the deep strategic mediatization of organizations. Poulsen (2022) studied the mediatized roles of Danish civil servants during the pandemic.

In this line of studies, media relations activities remain quite central in all these understandings of strategic communication and mediatization, and they are closely related to public relations and relationships with journalists (Broom and Sha, 2013; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2017). Media relations activities today have broadened their scope (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2018; Tsetsura, 2021) by leveraging the opportunities offered by the increasing diffusion and use of digital technologies which allow communicators to mediate their content directly to target audiences and for different purposes. In a way, digital technologies have accelerated the mediatization processes within organizations. Mediatization-related changes bring important implications not just on the content creation part of strategic communication, but also on how journalists perceive and value communicators as information subsidiaries (Jo, 2003) both in terms of hard and soft skills.

While some communication professionals focus solely on digital and social media, the majority also engage in traditional media tasks (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Bernhard and Russmann (2023) argue that traditional PR abilities such as presswork, PR campaigns, and event planning are increasingly expected from PR practitioners in Austria, unlike in Germany. Journalistic skills remain relevant in both Austria and Germany but are not as prominent as they once were. The authors concluded that digitalization is reshaping job profiles in PR within these countries primarily concerning hard skills and competencies, while soft skills such as organization, leadership, and teamwork (Meganck *et al.*, 2020) remain unaffected.

It is crucial to understand that mediatization, as an adaptation to media systems' logic, must be examined within the specific context and structure of each social and media system (Eskjær, 2018). A media system encompasses the different media and outlets functioning within a specific setting, as well as the procedures, routines, and cultures that link these outlets to their surrounding context (Mancini, 2020). While many early studies on the mediatization of strategic communications in organizations have concentrated on the Nordic region and in public sector organizations (e.g., Aagaard and Blach-Ørsten, 2018; Laursen and Valentini, 2015; Pallas and Fredriksson, 2013; Poulsen, 2022; Salomonsen *et al.*, 2016), there is

limited understanding in Southern countries such as Italy. Italy's media system is often classified under the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), which is characterized by high political parallelism and the powerful influence of political leaders on the media agenda (Mazzoleni 2010). These factors have historically influenced journalism freedom and agenda, but it is not clear whether they also influence the relationships with strategic communicators.

4.Strategic communication in Italy

Torp (2014) contends that elements of strategic communication have existed throughout civilization, but its institutionalization and recognition in Italy began in the last two decades (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011). The professionalization of strategic communicators and the establishment of training programs since the early 1990s contributed to this shift (Muzi Falconi and Kodilja, 2004).

Invernizzi and Romenti's national study (2011) noted a significant transformation in conceptualizing communication among large Italian companies, emphasizing strategic thinking. Media relations, once a basic tactical activity, is now contextualized as a strategy for fostering positive images and building reputation, especially within the marketing and visibility activities of organizations (Invernizzi, 2000; Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014). Functional separation is evident, with large organizations emphasizing strategy, integration, alignment, and stakeholder-oriented activities (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014), while smaller organizations focus on basic marketing and visibility activities through social media and media relations (Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014). Recent market results (Codilupi and Palesana, 2019) indicate a growing and diverse communication market in Italy involving communication professionals, journalists, and content creators.

Italian strategic communication often overlaps with other professions. This is partly because older generations of communicators had varied educational backgrounds, as formal programs in public relations and strategic communication only emerged in the 1990s (Muzi Falconi and Ventrizzo, 2015). Many learned their skills on the job and are slowly adapting their skills to social media environments (Lovari, 2016). Additionally, the profession lacks institutional recognition, leading to professional encroachments. For instance, in public sector organizations, journalists rather than communicators handle media relations and press services. Valentini (2014) noted this problem is exacerbated by the current legislation, which allows only official journalists to take on the information duties of public sector organizations. In that study, this encroachment was found, however, to produce positive professional evaluations, particularly on the side of communication professionals.

With the changing media landscape and more mediatized corporate content essential for attention and visibility, this study reassesses perceptions of communicator-journalist relationships, which are significantly impacted by these shifts. Specifically, it aims to find out:

RQ1 - How do professionals currently view the role of strategic

communication and journalism? Additionally, what are their opinions about one another?

RQ2 - What skills and competencies define the professions of strategic communication and journalism in the contemporary media landscape?

RQ3 - How do professionals perceive each other, their relationships, and their working practices?

RQ4 - What are the primary challenges encountered by these professionals in their field?

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5. Research Design

To study strategic communicators and journalists' professional identities, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with experts were conducted. Experts have specific knowledge about an issue, development, or event (Döringer, 2021) thus they are well-situated to provide process knowledge, which comprises knowledge about interactions, routines, or social practices in their professional field (van Audenhove and Donders, 2019). Expert interviews were used to identify the most common professional understandings that are currently circulating among their respective professional communities. To identify professional experts and strive for some heterogeneity (Patton, 2002), three main criteria were used: diversity of industry affiliation (private, public, non-profit) for the communication professionals, diversity of media affiliation for journalists (television, radio, newspaper/magazine), and consolidated work experience, meaning several years of professional experience. Less experienced professionals were excluded as they would not have had sufficient insights to reflect on past experiences and compare them with the present. Gender was not considered a relevant selection criterion nor age, as earlier studies identified no significant differences based on gender or age on questions about professional identity, roles, and relationship quality (Valentini, 2014, Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014, 2024). The recruitment process for interviewees followed a multi-stage approach. Initially, a list of potential participants was compiled based on publicly available professional profiles. Invitations were subsequently distributed via email, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement. Additional interviewees were incorporated into the sample until the point of data saturation was achieved (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). The final sample comprised 20 expert interviews including 10 senior communication professionals and 10 senior journalists. Five interviews were conducted in person, while the others were held via the Teams application. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed around the study's research questions, incorporating socio-demographic questions to better grasp the informants' viewpoints. The topics discussed included social perceptions of journalism and strategic communication, the roles and functions of both journalists and strategic communicators, their perceptions of one another, the quality of their relationships, and their professional practices. The interviews also explored emerging challenges

related to the media landscape, information quality, and the influence of social media platforms. Interview lengths ranged from 32 to 66 minutes. The interview material was then transcribed and thematically analyzed via Atlas.ti software.

Tab. 1: Interviewees' characteristics

Professional group	Gender *	Education level/degree	Years of experience	Type of Organization
Strategic communication	M	Master, humanities	27	Italian company
	M	Master, political sciences	17	Italian PR agency
	M	Master, economics	40	International PR agency
	M	Master, communication	15	Italian company
	M	High school	35	National government
	F	Master, law	15	International company
	F	High school	16	Public sector organization
	M	High school	25	International PR agency
	F	Master, economics	20	Italian company
	F	Master, political sciences	13	Not profit
	M	Master, political sciences	12	Italian lobbying agency
Journalism	M	Master, literature	22	National television
	M	Master, sociology	38	Regional radio
	F	High school	35	Regional newspaper
	M	Master, foreign languages	20	National newspaper
	M	Master, law	12	National weekly magazine
	M	Master, philosophy	30	National newspaper
	F	Master, economics	18	National weekly magazine
	M	High school	26	Italian National Press Federation (FNSI)
	M	High school	30	Weekly magazine
M	Master, philosophy	26	National television	

* Gender was not used as selection criteria but is reported to offer some indication of the interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics.

Data analysis procedure

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step- thematic analysis was used to extract meanings, opinions, and perceptions from the interview transcripts. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data through a close reading of the transcripts. Sentences describing each profession's function, objectives, and practices, including professional challenges and opportunities, were all noted down. Next, the researcher conducted a second reading and started creating an initial list of codes via Atlas.ti, version 23.3.0. The labeling used an inductive method, relying on the participants' own words. These codes generally reflected key social perceptions of professions, practices, and changes in the media landscape. In the third stage, the codes were refined and organized into macro thematic categories. Subsequently, themes were polished to identify coherent patterns within the data, reducing redundancy. This included regrouping and renaming the main themes. The entire dataset was reviewed against these refined themes. In the final stage, the story for each theme was linked to the research questions, with illustrative quotes selected and reported in the findings.

6. Findings

The analysis identified elements in five macro themes (the function of strategic communication, the function of journalism, communication professionals' perceptions of journalism, and journalists' perceptions of strategic communication, and professional challenges) and 7 second-level codes, of which four (skills and competencies, function, problems and relationships) are recurring sub-themes across the first four macro themes. The last three second-level codes pertain to the first-order theme of professional challenges. In each of these second-level codes, several social representations (third-level codes) emerged describing strategic communicators' and journalists' views on the five macro themes. Table 2 offers an overview of the analysis. In the following, a summary of the main findings is presented.

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Tab. 2: Thematic analysis of key findings

Macro-theme (Code 1)	Sub-theme (Code 2)	Social representations (Code 3)
Strategic communication as a profession	Skills and competencies	Capacity to create a network
		Being credible in speaking
		Having interpreting skills
		Being curious
		Having bridging skills
		Understanding others' views
		Being an active listener
		Having social intelligence in addressing complex situations
		Being detail-oriented and accuracy-oriented
		Showing knowledge/expertise on the topic
		Critical reflections of own practices
		Having team skills
		Functions
	Increasing positive organizational visibility and public understanding	
	Strategically working with the news media	
	Being an information subsidy for stakeholders	
	Being the organization's promoter	
	Problems	Handling internal and external relationships
		Lack of professional recognition
		Lack of professional institutionalization
		'Revolving door'
		Limited rigor and quality of produced information
		Poor ethical behaviors in own working practices
		Limited professional credibility
		Bribing for publications
		Lack of understanding of each other practices in media relations activities
		Possible conflicts of interests
	Limited quality training/education for professionals	
	Lying to stakeholders for organizational needs	
	Relationships with journalists	No antagonism
		Mutual professional trust
		Based on mutual respect
		Supported by maintaining distinct professional identities
Supported by correct and transparent information supply		
Enhanced by personal ethics		
Enhanced by previous journalistic experience		
Improved when recognizing own respective functions		

Journalism as a profession	Skills and competences	Being curious
		Having interpreting skills
		Being objective
		Showing intellectual honesty
		Being free and independent
		Being transparent
		Being critical and reflective
	Function	Being unbiased, without prejudices
		Searching and selecting stories
		Making the public understand complex situations
		Telling and interpreting facts and realities
		Telling the 'truth'
		Checking information sources
		Representing plurality/diversity of opinions
	Problems	Offering detailed and in-depth analyses
		Lack of freedom and independence from power
		Italian journalism system and its entanglement with economic interests
		Favoritism
		Too much dependence on information subsidies
		Poor working conditions for some journalists
Deterioration of quality of news reporting		
News media conformity		
Relationship with strategic communicators	National Council of Order of Journalists	
	Ineffective code of ethics	
	Slight animosity	
	Founded on trust through honesty and transparency	
	Supported by open, not-hidden agendas	
Strategic communication seen from the journalists' perspective	Function	Improved when communicators positively contribute to creating quality information
		Enhanced by previous positive experiences with communicators
		Communicating to the media
		Taking care of organizational visibility
		Speaking on behalf of an organization
		Promoting corporate interests
	Working practices	Being the gatekeeper of organizational information
		Communicating directly with publics
		A better grasp of the media landscape and information production system
	Relationships with journalists	Increased professionalization
		Increased information subsidy quality
		Inferiority perception by some communicators
		Positive in established relationships
		Facilitated when communicators give more attention to journalists' needs
	Problems	Reduced in situations of opacity
		Enhance news production and serve as a reliable source of information
		Publicity-oriented approach of some professionals
Lack of transparency/honesty		
Not disclosing own interests and purposes		
	Questionable professional ethics	
	Exerting power for news coverage	

Journalism seen from the strategic communicators' experiences	Function	Superiority perception by some journalists
		Reality simplifier
		Hallmark of democracy
		Being the first to inform the public
		A solo, individual job
		Providing interpretations
	Working practices	Similar tools, different finalities
		Preference for shortcuts rather than rigorous approaches
		Superficial coverage of issues
		Does not always follow deontological responsibility
		Can't always separate facts from opinions
	Relationships with strategic communicators	Lack of consideration of communicators' priorities
		Negative attitudes towards communicators
		Respect is possible
		Do not always understand communicators' standpoints
		At times, based on negative preconditions
		Opportunistic: Certain journalists prefer 'insiders' over building relationships with communicators
	Problems	Journalists' appreciation of their work
		'Revolving door'
		Lack of diversity of opinions in the news
Lack of independence from media ownership		
Limited freedom		
Unreliable professional code ethics		
Information quality		
Some conflicts of interests		
Shared professional challenges	Media landscape changes	Superficiality and limited accuracy
		Loss of relevance of traditional news media
		Social media is making people users and creators at the same time
		Increased influence of broader media over a national one
		Increasing information amplification/dissemination across different media
		Effects on stakeholder relationships
		Increased speed in communicating
		Accelerated and reshaped by technology developments
		New approaches to managing organizational messages
		Digital publics have become more effective and powerful communicators than official communicators
		No real online listening or relationship
		Multiplication of sources
		Quality of information
	Superficial and banal stories	
	Too many sensational stories	
	Less attention to opinion diversity (filter bubble phenomenon)	
	Loss of information credibility	
	Social media use	Shared responsibility for quality information
		Increased reliance by journalists on digital content over content produced by professional communicators
		Difficulties in identifying digital information origin and in screening
Identifying the tools, methods, and behaviors that are correct and effective in this digital environment		
Digital monitoring, analysis of data		
Low social media readiness of some professionals		
More pull communication than push communication		

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Strategic communicators see their role as managing an organization's reputation and its relations with stakeholders. This involves strategically working with the media to boost external visibility and enhance public understanding of the organization's activities and values.

"In performing this function, the communicator must be a bit like a 'transmission belt', a hinge of contact and relationships between the company and its stakeholders". (Strategic communicator #3)

Communicators agree that the information subsidiary function of strategic communication remains important but today this activity is more extensive as it is directed to all stakeholders and includes addressing the digital media sphere too. They see themselves as stake- or interest-holders for their organizations and, at the same time, advocates.

"The work of a company's communicator is evidently a carrier of the company's interests. What I believe is very important is the ability to intelligently balance this role as a promoter, supporter, and positive lobbyist that we perform for our company with the sensitivities and issues of attention and criticism that come from the outside". (Strategic communicator #2)

While some journalists described their profession according to classical notions of journalism, others seem to have embraced a broader understanding of journalism as a profession in the business of informing the public, for instance, even when they work for public sector organizations.

"I believe that the profession of a journalist is a necessary one in a political, economic, and financial democracy. It serves as a guarantee for all our dynamics". (Journalist #4)

"The journalist's objective is to narrate reality as objectively as possible, and therefore, delve into, dig, and verify sources as much as possible to create a product that makes it easy for the reader to understand the surrounding facts". (Journalist #6)

Their working practices are otherwise similar, in that they both describe their working logic as driven by objectivity, rigor, transparency, and accuracy. When asked to reflect on the other profession and identify main functions, it appears there is a slightly more correct alignment between strategic communicators' perceptions of journalism and journalists' own defined professional identity, than between journalists' perceptions of strategic communication, and communicators' own defined professional identity.

"The two professions are fundamentally different but are part of the same information process. They occupy two different positions within this process and respond to different and contrasting interests". (Strategic communicator #1)

Strategic communicators often view journalism through a traditional lens, recognizing it as essential to democracy, interpreting facts, and being the first to report events. Journalists share this same opinion. Journalists, on the other hand, have a much narrower view of the strategic communication profession. They believe communication professionals are in the business of publicity for their organizations, they represent the interests of their employer -not broader stakeholders- and are gatekeepers of organizational

information. They believe strategic communication should focus more on offering interpretations.

“Communicators continuously filter information; they are the gatekeeper of information flow, choosing to withhold certain details and, at times, opting not to disclose everything”. (Journalist #9)

“Today, journalists have almost all the information they need, and therefore the role of communicators should change. It should no longer be about keeping information confidential but providing an interpretation. The role of communicators is to offer an interpretation of the news that has now been released”. (Journalist #1)

They are also not so familiar with the communicators' code of ethics, and those who knew about it identified certain problems. Journalists overall acknowledge an increasing professionalization of strategic communication and recognition of its value, as they all stated that current communicators are most of the time more knowledgeable of the newsroom routines and media landscape and can provide more valuable information.

“[I find communicators] possessing an intriguing quality and a deep understanding of the information and media landscapes, enabling them to navigate the timing and mechanisms for delivering their contributions effectively. Furthermore, they know how to evaluate the ‘significance’ of their stories for the news”. (Journalist #10)

Interestingly they both complain to each other of being reality simplifiers. Overall, all experts think there are functional differences, but these are primarily related to the purpose of communicating. Their professional objectives are very different, with communicators communicating to the public for organizations, whereas journalists inform the public for the public, even when they work for public sector organizations.

RQ2: Professional skills and competencies of today's strategic communicators and journalists

Communication professionals identified several skills and competencies, including active listening and understanding others' views, critical reflections and analyses, social intelligence, interpreting and managing complex situations as well as bridging skills among others. Very interestingly, classical skills such as writing, and content production were not mentioned at all.

“Managing this complexity requires, on the one hand, a great deal of social intelligence, and on the other, an atmosphere of calm and transparency, which sometimes doesn't occur due to various interests”. (Strategic communicator #1)

“If one does not know how to listen, they do not understand either organizational mechanisms or the media and therein information processes (which are distinct entities with their dynamics, and each media has its dynamics). Knowing both mechanisms and having the ability to relate to them is a must, thus, acting as an ‘interpreter, translator, decoder, and often a simplifier’ (our job is to simplify the complexity of the company and the relationship) is needed”. (Strategic communicator #6)

Competences such as being able to speak credibly and authoritatively as well as showing knowledge and expertise on the topic have also been noted as important for this profession.

“One must always speak with these individuals as if addressing authoritative figures, always being very authoritative and rigorous, expressing and defending one’s concepts without concealing the fact that this position is being defended, with consistently serious, rigorous, and objective arguments”. (Strategic communicator #5)

Journalists described their skills quite traditionally and to some extent even similarly to those of communicators, emphasizing honesty, freedom, and curiosity as attitudes, objectivity, transparency, and ethics as values, and interpreting and writing as key skills.

“A good journalist must have a great deal of curiosity, possess the ability to analyze reality to understand it, be quick to interpret and write what they see, and maintain a constant desire to stay updated”. (Journalist #5)

Few also outline as important the competence of having a correct attitude and working approach in relating with communicators as these are perceived to provide valuable information facilitating journalistic job.

“[A journalist should possess] Precision and clarity in presenting the facts, the ability to expose more or less everything, correctness in relationships with communicators”. (Journalist #4)

RQ3: Strategic communicator-journalist relationships

Both groups agree that there is no evident antagonism between them. They generally view their relationships positively, emphasizing building mutual trust through understanding and collaboration. Some even consider their professional counterparts as friends, reflecting the high regard they have for each other.

“I maintain a collaborative relationship, particularly with those with whom I share a strong and special connection. In my interactions with journalists, I aim to identify individuals within various editorial teams who may find my messages relevant. With these individuals, I work towards building a structured and trustworthy collaborative relationship”. (Strategic communicator #8)

“Dismissing the old idea of a press office as just an information relay for communications, it’s important to highlight the role of relationship-building with journalists. Trust is built through ongoing dialogue and interactions between communicators and journalists. By engaging in conversations to understand each other’s needs, a more transparent, honest, and direct relationship can be cultivated, which ultimately enhances mutual trust”. (Strategic communicator #10)

However, conflicts may arise, particularly if both professions adopt a harsh attitude that damages relationships or if there is a lack of transparency in communication intentions. Communicators also lament the lack of consideration of communicators’ priorities.

“Antagonism exists only when it is marked by attitudes of arrogance from both sides, leading to a sterile antagonism. There should be healthy competition, but nowadays one cannot yet speak of healthy competition”.

because there is still a lack of rigor and transparency from both sides". (Strategic communicator #3)

"Journalists, especially the younger ones with limited experience and professional maturity, often exhibit a superiority complex towards communicators. For this reason, within organizations, no one wants to handle media relations with them. Objectively, at times, the relationship can be challenging". (Strategic communicator #5)

The journalist believes they are free, but they are not. They push themselves, thinking they are claiming a position of freedom, transparency, and impartiality, but in truth, they are under pressure from media companies, advertising, etc. They live with this unresolved conflict, which, in my opinion, leads to attitudes and behaviors that are not helpful" (Strategic communicator #6)

"Journalists can understand communicators' priorities, but they have other interests and therefore do not necessarily consider the priorities of communicators. Generally, it is the communicator who must align their priorities with those of the journalist, not vice versa". (Strategic communicator #8)

A common problem outlined by both professionals is related to the lack of rigor and ethics affecting relationships.

"Often, the media are not transparent about the reasons behind certain interests, and perhaps at times, communicators exert pressure or engage in lobbying that may not always be ethically acceptable. There should be greater rigor on the part of the communicator and greater independence and therefore authority on both sides". (Strategic communicator #3)

Another problem that affects their professional relationships and that was especially highlighted by communicators concerns the familiar revolving door issue, where journalists juggle "two hats" by serving as communicators for an organization while continuing to write for news media outlets. This issue is also presented both as an ethical and legal problem, but also as a problem impacting the reputation of the strategic communication field. Here are a few examples:

"Unfortunately, there have been detrimental moments of confusion in maintaining a separation between the two professions in the past. For example, I believe it is wrong that to be a communicator for a public sector organization, one must be a journalist, or the fact that thanks to the years of experience I have gained as a communicator, I can automatically become a publicist". (Strategic communicator #3)

"There are also 'field incursions' that are measurable and verifiable, and they should be punishable by both [ethics] codes: if I work as a strategic communicator, I cannot act as a journalist, and if I work as a journalist, I cannot act as a communicator for an organization". (Strategic communicator #6)

"The greatest frustration that a journalist can experience when changing profession and becoming a communicator concerns a shift in mindset. Understanding how an editorial office of a newspaper functions is valuable, but it is not sufficient for managing the relational aspects of strategic communication". (Strategic communicator #1)

Yet, the revolving door problem is less of a problem for journalists who, on the other hand, see it as an opportunity for them to broaden their function beyond news media organizations. Journalists in general do not see a problem in undertaking a strategic communication function in an organization if this new function is not occurring while at the same time working for a news media outlet.

RQ4: Professional challenges

Strategic communicators identified problems related to the lack of widespread professional recognition, the lack of professional institutionalization, the use and applicability of code of ethics, and the limited quality of training and education of certain professionals as key professional problems.

“There is a trend towards the decline of the profession [strategic communication], perhaps due to the lack of entry barriers, allowing anyone to improvise as a communicator. Meanwhile, there is a need to maintain high quality in client relations”. (Strategic communicator #7)

“The profession of the strategic communicator is still little known in Italy and, on the one hand, inadequately acknowledged and institutionalized, and on the other, insufficiently proceduralized. Therefore, defining the boundaries of the strategic communication profession is challenging since everyone sets their limits based on their ability to engage with the surrounding environment”. (Strategic communicator #1)

Journalists, on the other hand, think professional recognition of strategic communication has improved and increased while recognizing the problem related to the enforcement of professional code of ethics. Other problems are primarily related to the methods and practices utilized by certain individuals who lack rigor, and quality, and, at times, may sit in the grey zone, for instance, in circumstances when the communicator lies to stakeholders to protect their own organization's interest or pay/bribe for news coverage.

“[About gaining visibility] a communicator must not pay to obtain; that is, one must be capable of asserting themselves with the strength of their reasons and their ability to embellish these reasons, meaning to represent them in a way that they are shared”. (Journalist #4)

Journalists highlight worries over declining information quality, poor reporter conditions, lack of focus on ethics, and issues with their national council. They also mention problems stemming from elite economic and political influence that hinder media freedom and independence. Like communicators, they also find problematic some working practices, but to a lesser extent.

“The category of journalists is somewhat in crisis. Excluding the ‘cream’ that is, those who can work at a certain level, the majority, due to working hours, publisher demands, increasingly limited spaces, and newspaper formats, have less room for reports, investigations, and in-depth coverage. Therefore, they are involved more in writing work like wire services”. (Journalist #6)

"Italian journalism has had two major flaws: excessive dependence on its information sources and over-reliance on economic and political powers". (Journalist #3)

"Job insecurity can somehow impact the quality of information, in the sense that a precarious journalist may more easily succumb to the pressures of influential parties". (Journalist #2)

Communicators outlined several problems concerning journalists' working practices, including the preferences for shortcuts, rather than a rigorous process, and problems of objectivity and freedom, and these all together bring superficial coverage of the events at times.

"I follow strict internal rules and prioritize those requesting information. I'm aware of my limits and constraints. Conversely, journalists often disregard ethical or professional responsibilities and may act carelessly with a sense of 'freedom'". (Strategic communicator #2)

Both groups of professionals have concerns about the evolving media landscape. Rapid digitalization, social media, and other digital platforms are evolving too quickly to keep pace. They agree that traditional news media are losing their importance as new digital platforms become more influential. With fast communication and the rise of content creators, there is a greater need to screen digital information since anyone can become an influential voice in this ecosystem.

"Social media have opened a world that is still causing confusion, and one must still figure out how to approach it and the methods for managing this information. For us, the issue revolves around how this information originates on social media, not just concerning its use by journalists". (Strategic communicator #7)

The identification of the origin and source of digital information is also more complicated, and this means more difficulty in actively listening to publics and create relations with them.

"I have the impression that the difficulty we encounter lies with online publics. While the traditional journalist is a well-defined stakeholder, much of the communication that occurs via the Internet involves a group of individuals which is not well-defined for us". (Strategic communicator #2)

"Social media are evolving so quickly that is difficult to keep up with. They have changed information dynamics because we deal with 'listener-author' stakeholders now. The audience increasingly becomes an author, to the point where there is a partnership between media-channel and author-user". (Journalist #3)

Journalists generally view these changes as opportunities to quickly gather diverse opinions on their topics. However, communication professionals reported a few challenges, like insufficient skills for handling digital data, a still too-low social media readiness, a need for more pull communication, and difficulties in finding effective tools, methods, and ethical practices.

"Push communication remains important, but it has had its time because the relationship is increasingly 'pull,' meaning it is the user who decides when and how to hear what the company has to say. And when this happens, the company must be present and be 'connected'". (Strategic communicator #7)

“The reality of social media is evident, but my impression is that we are struggling to find tools, methods, and behaviors to manage this additional demand for information and communication more effectively. There is a bit of a delay on this issue. The problems range from basic monitoring to evaluating the quality of these sites”. (Strategic communicator #2)

While these technologies have brought opportunities to manage organizational messages more effectively, communicators lament that journalists may rely too much on digital content - whose truthfulness is questionable - while they should still check their sources.

“Many times, the information taken from the internet is not true, and journalists tend not to verify the sources of this information. The accuracy and truthfulness of information on social media require much more verification than that provided by communicators”. (Strategic communicator #6)

Among the consequences of these rapid changes, professionals indicate the increased problem of fake information circulation, the increased dissemination and attention for superficial and banal stories, including sensational ones, the problem of loss of accuracy and objectivity of information, and thus the increased biased content.

“When you search for major corporations on Google, aside from the official website, you’ll often see forums and blogs in the top results. Despite potential reliability issues, this widespread trend (and is democratic and revolutionary) is too significant to be overlooked”. (Journalist #7)

“There is too much inclination towards gossip, which tends to be based on sensationalistic information, and whose sources are not verified, probably because the structure of Italian media landscape which includes a bit of everything, and the press is not differentiated as in other countries”. (Strategic communicator #10)

Strategic communicators concur that the quality of information circulating in today’s media landscape is a shared responsibility of all those involved in communication, not just journalists.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate ‘asymmetric’ opinions describing the professional identities and roles of strategic communication and journalism (RQ1). Like the findings by Werder *et al.* (2023), both groups acknowledged distinct communication roles while describing highly similar working practices. Strategic communicators highlighted a wider range of expertise beyond media relations, recognizing the use of various media and technologies, thus resonating with Invernizzi and Romenti’s (2011, 2014) early findings. Conversely, journalists had a more limited perception of the role of strategic communication. While similar working practices highlight what Werder *et al.* (2023) describe as the convergence of ‘doing,’ they might also point to the growing mediatization of strategic communication, as noted by Fredriksson and Pallas (2017) and Pallas *et al.* (2016). To add to this, journalists have observed that communication professionals are becoming increasingly adept and well-prepared in content production. Italian strategic communicators are aware of this and

describe their role as highly strategy-focused, including media relations, acting as intermediaries in various organizational activities. They describe themselves as a “transmission belt” or a bridge that links stakeholder interests, discursively constructing an understanding of their profession as one oriented to strategic mediatization (Wiesenberg and Tench, 2020). While maintaining their core news media function, journalists have shown to accept and perhaps embrace other communication functions than simply working for media organizations. This phenomenon is not new, as early studies on the journalism profession showed that many journalists leave the news industry for public relations jobs (e.g., Fröhlich *et al.*, 2013; Viererbl and Koch, 2021). However, a peculiarity is that some of these professionals still describe themselves as journalists working for public sector organizations serving the public interest rather than strategic communicators. The identity of the latter is often associated with commercial and private interests.

Interestingly, these two professional groups appear to agree on the essential skills, competencies, and values of their professions (RQ2). This trend has also been observed in other countries (Tkalac Verčič and Colić, 2016; Weder *et al.*, 2023). The revolving door problem has helped these two professions to a) know each other work better and thus appreciate it more, and b) refine and expand their value-set through their experiences with each other worlds. Thus, while the revolving door problem is criticized for being one of the main reasons for professional conflict (Shin and Cameron, 2004), the fact that many strategic communicators have had prior journalism experiences and that some journalists had some communication experiences have served the purpose of sharing and gaining similar expertise and thereby creating similar social representations of what constitutes good quality information and communication. This then has produced more collaborative and constructive relations that are important for effective media relations. In response to RQ3, thus, it is possible to conclude that antagonist relations are rather associated with the past (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003) than with modern media relations activities. Strategic communication has become more mediatized (Ihlen and Pallas, 2014), more value-driven, and highly concerned with credibility and reputation management activities, and this has resulted in better journalists' perceptions of strategic communication and appreciation of communicators' work. Increasing mediatization and increasing professionalization stemming from values such as rigor, transparency, and accuracy of information could potentially produce positive effects on the circulation of information in the media ecosystem. Both groups agree that the responsibility for the quality of information is becoming more and more a shared responsibility than a journalism one. They also acknowledged a loss of relevance of traditional news media information in public opinion formation, as publics are using more and more online content to gain information and insights, including journalists seeking stories.

Among the most important professional challenges outlined (RQ4), these professionals believe the quality of information circulating in the current digitalized media ecosystem is questionable, with journalists having more positive views than strategic communicators. These express

concern over a prevailing trend of superficial and trivial stories, along with an excessive focus on personal and subjective narratives, which is indicative of the traits seen in Polarized Pluralist media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Meanwhile, journalists highlight the problem of media ownership by the economic elite and the influence of the political elite on news stories coupled with perceptions that the National Council of the Order of Journalists is not sufficiently addressing journalism-related issues are among those problems that journalists believe are affecting the quality of information circulating in the media landscape.

Nonetheless, a general optimism concerning the opportunities offered by social media and other digital media for producing, disseminating, and searching content (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023) is particularly visible among journalists (Jamil, 2023). Journalists acknowledge that this environment can offer great prospects to address the even faster news information demand-supply chain and the increasing demand for more diversified information subsidies (European Commission, 2023). Strategic communicators seem more cautious about these opportunities. While they consider these technologies an advantage for strategically planning, creating, and distributing organizational messages, they see several challenges concerning the credibility and authenticity of the information circulating online, the problem of fake information and filter bubbles, and are still unsure of how to best use and manage different channels effectively.

8. Conclusions

This study explored how strategic communicators and journalists perceive their professional identity and role in the face of the pressures and the challenges posed by an ever-evolving media landscape and increasing mediatization of content. Early studies (Verhoeven, 2016; Wilson and Supa, 2013; Walden *et al.*, 2015) have indicated that such changes are re-configuring not only the media ecosystem where different professionals operate but they are also influencing institutional logics describing the functions and roles of certain professionals (Viererbl and Koch, 2021; Werder *et al.* 2023). Based on an explorative qualitative study of strategic communication and journalism professionals in the Italian context, this study contributed to the understanding of how these professions are responding to media landscape changes and increasing mediatization of institutional and professional work environments and how they are adapting to these. This study responds to the call for more empirical evidence on professional communication identities and practices in different cultural settings too (Werder *et al.* 2023).

Theoretically, the study enhances our understanding of the professional identities and relationships of key communication actors amidst mediatization. Despite the limitations of a qualitative approach, the results suggest that mediatization is positively impacting professionals in Italy, especially journalists' views on strategic communication. Future research could explore the perceptions and social representations of other professions working closely with strategic communicators (see, e.g.,

Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field's evolution and value. This study also contributes to current discourses on the impact of digitalization and media changes on professional identities, outlining the important role of understanding the experiences of those working in strategic communication and journalism to identify opportunities and threats that can inform future research. Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are, for once, changing substantially the practices of those working in communication. This is still a new phenomenon that deserves attentive monitoring and consideration as the professional identities of strategic communicators and journalists are going to be affected. Future studies could look at AI technologies in the context of professional identity and roles.

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Professionally, this study provides valuable insights into the skills and competencies necessary for success in both fields and identifies those most critical for effective media relations. This information is crucial for educators in higher education and training institutions to update curricula, encourage continuous learning, and advance communication knowledge. Professional associations representing strategic communicators and journalists should leverage these findings to drive positive change. They can significantly contribute to raising professional standards and improving the transferability of competencies at an advanced level.

9. Limitations

This study employs a qualitative approach and, as such, is subject to the inherent limitations of qualitative research, particularly concerning sample size and participant characteristics. Although significant effort was made to select interviewees with extensive and diverse professional experiences, the inclusion of younger participants may have offered alternative perspectives on the discussion of professional competencies. While comparing generational cohorts of professionals was not the primary aim of this study, it represents an avenue for future research.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that social representations of professional identities are often context-dependent and personal. There is also the potential for desirability bias in how the experts described their professional experiences. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher's subjectivity in data analysis and interpretation cannot be entirely eliminated. However, grounding the findings in existing literature has contributed to maintaining the accuracy of the analysis, though this limitation still warrants consideration.

Given the inherent challenges in replicating qualitative studies of this nature, the value of this research lies in its ability to identify key trends in the evolving fields of strategic communication and journalism within the Italian context. As such, the study should be regarded as a foundation for further exploration in this area.

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Connecting with visually acculturated audiences: A hypermodern perspective

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Abstract

Framing of the research: This paper connects the theoretical lens of hypermodernity, organizational rhetoric, and organizational identification to understand visually acculturated audiences in a social-media saturated world and enable organizations to effectively engage with hypermodern audiences.

Purpose of the paper: This conceptual paper aims to examine drivers behind the emergent communication preference of audiences towards visual media in a social-media saturated age. It also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences.

Methodology: NA as this is a conceptual paper

Findings: Through the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification, this paper suggests that organizations can foster identification with visually acculturated audiences by co-creating identity with individual rhetors. This involves leveraging visual spectacles that resonate with hypermodern audiences, who prioritize crafting unique and extraordinary identities rooted in experiential, emotion-rich consumption, and a love of the spectacular.

Research limits: This is an exploratory conceptual paper, which could be followed up with empirical work. Future studies could create research instruments that could help to identify hypermodern audiences. Studies can also examine the processes through which visual rhetoric of organizational identity accomplishes identification with hypermodern audiences.

Practical implications: Communicators in organizations can strengthen their audience engagement strategies through co-creating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with these hypermodern audiences.

Originality of the paper: This paper enriches audience research in organizational contexts applicable across disciplinary domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising by connecting the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification.

Key words: visual communication; hypermodernity; organizational identification; organizational rhetoric; audiences; social media

1. Introduction

From cave paintings of mammoths in the stone ages to memes of button-nosed puppies in the social ages, visuals have enthralled the human imagination. However, rapid innovations in communication technologies and the viral spread of social media platforms that foreground visuals over text have accentuated the role of visuals in communication, contributing to

the creation of audiences acculturated to a social world of visual spectacle (Edwards, 2018; Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). 91% of consumers now prefer visual content over text-based media (www.forbes.com).

The emergence of visually acculturated audiences acquires great significance particularly because there is increasing evidence of the ability of visuals and images to affect individuals' persuasion and decision-making through affective and heuristic routes to persuasion, circumventing logic, and rationality (Quick *et al.*, 2015; Rhodes, 2017). This trend holds important implications for organizations as they communicate and engage with their diverse internal and external stakeholders across domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising (Clancy and Clancy, 2016; Dhanesh, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Yet, research on the visual dimension in organizations has been sparse. Even within this sparse body of work most of the research has been organization-centric, largely employing a strategic, rhetorical perspective examining issues such as legitimacy, identity, identification, and community building (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Scholars have called for more studies on the characteristics of audiences who have been acclimatized to visual rhetoric fueled by the spread of social media (Edwards, 2018; Kjeldsen, 2018).

Accordingly, this conceptual paper proposes hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2005; Schaal, 2013) as a theoretical lens to understand visually acculturated audiences. This paper has chosen the concept of hypermodernity to generate insights into these emergent audiences because the concept of hypermodernity provides rich, insightful glimpses into the attitudes, behaviors, and communication preferences of a set of contemporary publics in advanced data-driven societies (Armitage, 2001; Lipovetsky, 2005; Roberts and Armitage, 2006; Schaal, 2013). Connecting these theoretical insights with the key tenets of organizational rhetoric (Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Heath *et al.*, 2018) and the body of work on organizational identity (Cheney and Christensen, 2001; He and Brown, 2013), this paper also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their communication and engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences.

Theoretically, this paper makes two novel contributions. First, it enriches sparse work on audience research in organizational contexts applicable across disciplinary domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising. Second, by borrowing and connecting the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identity, it offers a novel perspective on understanding and adapting to visually acculturated audiences in a social-media saturated age. Practically, it will offer communication managers valuable theory-based insights that could strengthen their approach to engaging with these hypermodern audiences, particularly by building and articulating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with them.

2. The rise of a visual world fueled by social media

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Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram with their mostly visual affordances; Facebook with live streams and TikTok and YouTube with videos enable the construction of a social world that is increasingly more visual than verbal. Photo albums, pictures, and videos generate far more likes and reactions from publics than content without images (Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Most importantly, images shared on social media travel freely across linguistic, national, and cultural borders with real life implications for individuals and organizations. For instance, Doerr's (2017) study examining European far-right activists' use of cartoon images making fun of immigrants found that images depicting immigrants as black sheep, initially circulated via online blogs and social networks in Switzerland, not only crossed linguistic and national borders in Europe through online networks, but was also picked up by mainstream media, and finally affected public and policy agendas. Similarly, opponents of genetically modified (GM) foods in the U.S. and Europe were successful in their visual campaign against GM foods by employing memetic images such as Frankenfoods that could travel freely across borders, and contest rational arguments about the safety of GM foods (Clancy and Clancy, 2016).

Various reasons have been offered for the popularity and effectiveness of visuals in the age of social media. First, visuals are regarded as attention-grabbing, and easy-to-digest media content (Flam and Doerr, 2015; Rose, 2012; Seo, 2014). Second, as the previous examples demonstrate, visuals can transcend linguistic, national, and cultural barriers. Research on transnational political communication in the European Union has shown that language poses a barrier for citizens communicating online across different countries (Doerr, 2010; Doerr and Mattoni, 2014). Visual and digital media offer a solution by facilitating connections among diverse political actors across national, linguistic, and cultural barriers (Doerr, 2017; Seo, 2014). Further examining why offensive images can easily transcend linguistic and national boundaries, Flam and Doerr (2015) argued it could be because images are carried through the emotional reactions they create. Visual imagery draws its persuasive power from its ability to trigger emotions necessary for persuasion and hence visuals have been an important aspect of propaganda research (Brantner, *et al.*, 2011; Fahmy *et al.*, 2014; Rose, 2012). The powerful effect of images to trigger emotions has been explained using theories such as Heuristic Systematic Model of information processing (Dixon, 2016; Kim and Cameron, 2011) situated within increasing research that examines the role of affect in communication (e.g., Druckman and McDermott, 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004; Nabi, 2003).

The body of work reviewed above clearly places the reasons for the popularity of visuals on the characteristics of visuals themselves as attention-grabbing, easy to share, and able to transcend multiple boundaries. It has also been explained using theories of affect and their role in persuasion. However, scholars have called for more research on audience characteristics, the *bodies* that confer meaning on visuals, especially in

the context of social media (Edwards, 2018). Adami and Jewitt (2016) summarized four themes that sum up research on social media and visual research published in a special issue on the topic. These themes include the study of emerging genres and practices; identity construction for individuals and organizations through visuals shared online; every day vernacular practices of sharing visuals that make the private public; and the transmedia circulation and appropriation of images that are edited, manipulated, and reused. Even within this recent body of work, there is hardly any focus on the audience and their characteristics.

Beyond the study of visuals in social media, a review of the literature on visual studies in communication identified three major strains of thought: visual rhetoric, visual pragmatics and visual semantics (Barnhurst *et al.*, 2004), among which visual rhetoric, or “the actual image rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating” (Foss, 2005: 143), was identified as the most widely used approach to visual studies in communication. Most of the visual research presented at conferences of the International Communication Association also employed a visual rhetoric approach, arguing that visual imagery influences ideas, ways of living, and pictures of the world, across varying audience demographics. The rhetorical approach can be employed to examine the role of visuals within organizations too (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013).

3. Rhetorical approach to studying visuals in organizations

Organizations need to communicate, and rhetoric helps explain the ways in which organizations use words and symbols to accomplish their political or economic goals by co-creating meaning, crafting identities, and building relationships with multiple stakeholders (Ihlen and Heath, 2018). However, acknowledging that work on rhetoric has been confined to disciplinary domains, Ihlen and Heath (2018) brought together scholars from the allied disciplines of organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising to produce *The Handbook of Organizational Rhetoric and Communication* in an attempt to break down silos among work on rhetoric.

Scholars who have contributed to this book noted that the rhetorical tradition, drawn from the ancient writings of Aristotle and Isocrates, and from modern scholars of rhetoric such as Burke and Perelman, has shifted focus from individual rhetors to examine all forms of symbolic action by human social collectives (see Conrad and Cheney, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018). Although rhetoric implies the purposive, strategic use of symbols intended to influence others, perhaps of most relevance to this paper is Burke’s focus on rhetoric as accomplishing identification rather than persuasion (Conrad and Cheney, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Smudde and Courtright, 2018). Identification can be accomplished by the ethos of the rhetor, individuals or organizations, as well as by the attitudes and perspectives shared with others. Applying the concept of identification to organizational rhetoric, Rosenfeld (1969: 183) proposed that identification “is finding a shared element between the speaker’s point

of view and the audience's, or finding the audience's point of view and the speaker's and convincing them that they share a common element." Cheney (1983; 1991) argued that organizations' efforts to achieve identification with their stakeholders can take different forms such as the rhetor (a) establishing a common ground with the audience, (b) posing an antithesis or a *common enemy* to unite against and (c) creating transcendence where individuals or organizations ally with similar others to share a group identity. According to the theory of the rhetoric of identification, poetry, rhetoric, and dialectic are three types of symbolic action through which human beings try to influence each other (Heath, 1986). Arguing that the ultimate purpose of rhetoric is identification, compared to conventional purposes such as persuasion, information, and entertainment; and cardinal purposes such as influencing knowledge, attitude and behavior, Smudde and Courtright (2018) applied rhetoric to message design and argued that Burke's dramatism and Bormann's (2001) Symbolic Convergence Theory helped to explain identification.

Drawing on Burke's concept of dramatism, Smudde and Courtright (2018) argued that identification can be realized through message design when organizations enact dramas about issues and topics that are compatible with stakeholders' dramas about these issues and topics. Similarly, Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory centers on messages that inspire identification with a larger group through generating fantasy themes, fantasy types, symbolic cues, and sagas. According to the theory, *fantasy* refers to any component of a message that could capture an audience's imagination. It becomes a *fantasy theme* when the theme catches on and is accepted by a group of individuals. The more a theme is shared and spreads, the more likely audiences are to develop *symbolic cues*, which are rhetorical signals that indicate the theme. The *fantasy type* is broader and is based on recognizing intertextuality with other similar discourses prevalent in other groups, which could produce similar stock scenarios. A collection of such scenarios could then yield a *saga* or a much repeated telling of stories of individuals or groups. However, the authors also noted that the idea of convergence obscures ethical issues of power such as motivating self-interests and issues of hegemonic intentions.

For rhetoric to be effective and create identification between organizations and their audiences, it must be in sync with the thoughts and vocabulary of its intended audiences (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2011). Several scholars have theorized about audiences as rhetorical constructions. For example, the audience as visualized by the speaker could fall into two categories, the *particular audience*, for whom specific message appeals and arguments are created and the broader *universal audience*, to whom facts and truths are addressed (Perelman, 1979); a *constructed audience* in a rhetorical situation who enacts agency within the context of a specific problem (Bitzer, 1968); the notion of the *second persona* or the agentic intended audience that responds to the speaker or the *first persona* (Black, 1970); and the notion of the *constituted audience* who are constructed through the process of identification between organizations and their audiences (Charland, 1987). Yet, as in most rhetorical studies, the focus of research on communication and organizations has been on the speaker

and message, and the role of the audience as an active contributor to the communication process has been mostly ignored (Edwards, 2018; Leitch and Neilson, 2001).

Reviewing research on visual rhetoric within organizational studies, scholars have noted that although communication in and by organizations is becoming increasingly dominated by visuals, there is hardly any focus on the practice and research of the visual dimension in organizations (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Kjeldsen (2018) noted that research tended to examine issues related to trust and credibility, legitimacy, values and norms, and identity, identification, and community, the latter three mostly from advertising and brand research. Meyer *et al.* (2013) classified the scant research on visuals in organizations into five approaches, amongst which the strategic approach, which examines the ability of visuals to draw desired responses from audiences, is the most rhetorically informed by examining concepts such as meaning-making, influence, and persuasion employing concepts from the rhetorical tradition. However, this body of work, similar to traditional rhetorical studies focuses on the message and the organization and does not deal with the role of audiences in rhetorical arenas.

If we are living in an increasingly visual world hyper connected through transnational online social networks, and if visuals exert strong persuasive powers through emotions, and the heuristics and biases they trigger, and if these technology-driven sociological and communication trends have given rise to visually acculturated audiences, then how can organizations understand these audiences and the underlying sociological trends and respond materially and rhetorically? The following sections aim to answer these questions, through the lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identity.

4. Characteristics of Hypermodernity

According to French scholars, the postmodern era transitioned into the hypermodern age in the 1980s, characterized by *hyperconsumption* and *hyperindividualism* (Aubert, 2005; Lipovetsky, 2005). What distinguishes hypermodernity from postmodernity seems to be a singular focus on excess (Gottschalk, 2009). “In every domain there is a certain excessiveness, one that oversteps all limits, like an excrescence...” (Lipovetsky, 2005: 32). This penchant for excess is demonstrated in all domains of social life: in reality shows on television that insist on hyper transparency, in urban, overpopulated hyper megalopolises, in hyper surveillance in the face of terrorism, even in individual behavior as evidenced by manic consumption, the penchant for extreme sports that pushes one to the limits of human endurance, the phenomenon of bulimia and anorexia and the consumption of performance enhancing drugs to reach beyond one’s best.

To Lipovetsky, hypermodernity is the ultimate manifestation of modernity: “Far from modernity having passed away, what we are seeing is its consummation, which takes the concrete form of a globalized liberalism, the quasi-general commercialization of lifestyles, the exploitation ‘to

death' of instrumental reason, and rampant individualism" (Lipovetsky, 2005: 31). The following section will discuss three specific characteristics of hyperindividualism that are particularly relevant to understanding visually acculturated audiences (1) experiential and emotional consumption, (2) the need for constructing extraordinary identities, and (3) obsession with the spectacular.

4.1 *Experiential and emotional consumption*

The hypermodern individual does not consume for the sake of flaunting to others, or to outshine others but consumes for the sake of individual pleasure. "The quest for private pleasures has taken over from the demand that one flaunts one's status and win social recognition: the contemporary period is witnessing the establishment of a luxury of an unprecedented kind - an emotional, experiential, psychologized luxury, which replaces the theatricality of social display by the primacy accorded to sensations" (Charles, 2005: 11). However, the objects of consumption have changed from material to qualitative, enriching experiences. Hypermodern individuals engage in *experiential* and *emotional* consumption avidly relishing the consumption of culture, travel, fitness, spirituality, and history over material consumption (Aubert, 2005; Gottschalk, 2009; Lipovetsky, 2005). For instance, a hypermodern individual might prefer an exploratory adventure along the Nile or the Amazon over buying the latest branded suit or handbag. Emerging consumption-scapes reflect such hypermodern sociological trends of post-materialism or an increasing detachment to material possessions that have propelled the rise of the sharing economy, where instead of purchasing and owning things, consumers prefer to pay for the experience of temporarily accessing the goods and services they want. Experience, not ownership, has become the ultimate expression of consumer desire (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Examining consumers' relationship to material possessions, specifically in the context of contemporary global nomadism, where individuals and families engage in serial relocation and frequent short-term mobility Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) found a liquid relationship to possessions, characterized by detachment and flexibility. A detached, *liquid* relationship to material possessions and increasing emphasis on engaging with an experience economy is also bound up with hypermodern individuals' need to actively construct their sense of identity.

4.2 *The need for constructing extraordinary identities*

Extreme levels of independence and autonomy characterize hypermodern individuals, produced largely by the collapse of dominant social structures of meaning imposed on individuals. Hypermodern individuals are not doled out similar sets of prefabricated identities such as Muslim, Christian, Spanish or British that come with their own set of stable and predictable norms and practices. In the hypermodern world, bereft of such fixed and prefabricated identities and rigid mandates that are handed down, individuals are faced with new needs for meaning, security,

for belonging to new groups and communities. On their own, they need to actively craft fresh identities that have become more fluid and malleable, and are continually open to contestation, negotiation, articulation, and re-articulation. These emergent identities are actively constructed by hypermodern individuals through self-reflexive deliberation (Schaal, 2013) fashioning themselves into eco-warriors, the socially conscious, minimalists, and stoics in ways that permeate rigid boundaries and envision identities that are unique and boundary-spanning. Above all, in a hypermodern world, these freshly minted and continually configured identities must be hyper exclusive and unrivalled, identities that discard averageness and celebrate exceptionalism.

Hyperconsuming emotion-rich experiences has a natural fit with actively constructing extraordinary identities for hypermodern individuals. For instance, a trekking trip along the Amazon or the Nile perfectly resonates with an identity built on themes of eco-consciousness, curiosity, exploration, and adventure. Or, participating in an organization's socially responsible volunteer drive of rebuilding homes in a typhoon battered community in Puerto Rico might tie in well with an avowed identity of care and compassion (Dhanesh, 2020). These identities built upon a repertoire of emotional, experiential consumption are further strengthened through visual rhetoric facilitated by online social media networks.

4.3 *Obsession with the spectacular*

Hypermodern individuals are consumed by a love of spectacles and grandiose, fantastic representations of realities. The hypermodern individual, who has been treated to a plethora of individual choices offered by the logics of mass-produced fashion, is rather fickle when it comes to preferences and inclinations, without steadfast and deeply entrenched likes and dislikes. Faced with a multitude of options and unstable, shapeshifting whims and fancies, the hypermodern individual can be moved to action only by spectacular representations of the social world.

According to Lipovetsky (1994), the media have pandered to this need for spectacle and superficiality by foregrounding the entertainment and theatrical values of their messages. Instead of focusing on the real and the rational, advertisements feature the spectacular and the fantastic, or the hyperspectacle. Lipovetsky (1994: 158) argues, "Advertising does not seduce *homo psycho-analyticus*, but *homo ludens*. Its effectiveness has to do with its playful superficiality, with the cocktail of images, sounds, and meanings it offers without any concern for the constraints of reality or the seriousness of truth." Beyond advertising, Lipovetsky's (2005) thoughts on hyperspectacle are highly evident in the emergence of a visual culture fueled by social media, which has enabled a massive surge in the production and consumption of visual imagery over online networks that has produced audiences acculturated to a social world of visual spectacle (Clancy and Clancy, 2016; Dhanesh, 2018; Edwards, 2018; Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016).

Experiential consumption that actively feeds narratives of freshly fashioned identities can now be made more vivid and spectacular with

visuals that are shared seamlessly over boundaryless online social networks. For example, a selfie posted online with the ethereal Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis in the background not only exemplifies hypermodern individuals' experiential and emotion-rich consumption that can amplify identity narratives of exploration and adventure, but also their obsession with spectacles.

To summarize, these three rich, nuanced insights into the psychographic preferences of hypermodern individuals can help to explain the rise of visually acculturated audiences. Although hypermodern theorists did not apply the concept of hypermodernity to the specific context of social media, this paper argues that hypermodern individuals' love of the spectacular is stoked by the spread of social media platforms that are underpinned by their rich visual affordances that celebrate the creation and amplification of online visual spectacles.

However, hypermodern audiences' love of spectacle doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is founded on their need to build unique, exceptional identities on a base of hyperconsumption of emotion-laden experiences. Hence, what appears to be visually acculturated audiences might reflect much deeper hypermodern motivations to rhetorically construct individual identities that are unique and extraordinary, built on a base of rich, emotion-laden experiences.

How can these insights into hypermodern audiences help organizational communicators?

5. Adapting to hypermodern audiences through organizational identification

If talking the language of the audience is a prerequisite for organizational rhetoric to achieve intended outcomes, and if audiences are increasingly turning to the visual in a social media-saturated world, it appears as though there is a pressing need for organizations to draw on the powers of the visual and engage in a *conversation of images* with key audiences (Adami and Jewitt, 2016; Clancy and Clancy, 2016). However, insights from hypermodernity into probable motivations of these visually acculturated audiences indicate that for organizations to respond using visuals might be insufficient.

There could be a need to delve deeper and engage with the identity-building motivations behind hypermodern audiences' love for visual spectacle. Hypermodern individuals are intensely focused on the individual self and produce and consume fantastical visuals driven by the need to craft individual identities. In response, organizations could go back to the basics, to posing existential questions - who are we? what do we stand for? - before even beginning to engage with hypermodern audiences using the language of visuals. Literature on organizational/corporate identity has much to offer on this topic.

Just as individuals have their own identities, organizations also have their distinctive identities that distinguish them from other organizations, and help to maintain credibility and legitimacy, for both internal and external

stakeholders (Bravo *et al.*, 2012; Cheney and Christensen, 2001). While literature on identity has grown across a variety of disciplines, including organizational behavior, marketing, organizational communication, sociology, advertising, public relations, and organizational strategy, literature on identity in institutional contexts have two main homes - the complementary concepts of *organizational identity* in organizational behavior and *corporate identity* in marketing (Balmer, 2008). However, while the notion of organizational identity tends to take on an internal, employee focus answering the question - who are we? - the notion of corporate identity has a more external focus, answering the question - how do we want to be known? (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; He and Brown, 2013).

In their seminal work, Albert and Whetten (1985) proposed that an organization's identity was constituted by a set of claims on what was central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization. Reviewing literatures on organizational identity and identification, He and Brown (2013) noted that work on organizational identity has been characterized by an intense focus on the collective, organizational selves. He and Brown (2013) also noted that in addition to functionalist perspectives that consider organizational identity to consist of tangible features such as corporate logos, and physical attributes of organizations; organizational identity has also been theorized as discursive and rhetoric constructions co-created by the narrator and the audience, which is more in line with the rhetorical perspective of creating identities and enabling identification.

Similar to the functionalist perspective of organizational identity, the origin of corporate identity can be traced to visual and graphic design and the symbolic ways in which organizations present themselves to audiences, mostly using elements of visual design (Balmer, 2008; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; He and Brown, 2013). However, more recently, the definition of corporate identity has extended beyond that of visual imagery to encompass the core set of characteristics that define an organization, including characteristics and attributes that represent its essence, personality, values, commitment to social responsibilities, and internal culture (Balmer, 2008; Balmer *et al.*, 2007; Bravo *et al.*, 2012). Perez and Bosque (2011: 147) defined corporate identity as "both the central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of the company, and the collection of tools the organization uses to present itself to stakeholders." This inclusive transformation is probably perfectly poised to feed into organizational visual rhetoric that could aim to achieve identification with identity-seeking hypermodern audiences in love with the self, experiences, and the spectacular.

6. Humanizing organizations and communicating spectacularly

Hypermodern audiences are intensely fixated on crafting extraordinary individual identities based on affect-laden experiences, rhetorically accomplished through spectacular visual imagery. Three aspects are crucial here. One, the intense consumption of emotion-rich experiences. Two, the focus on crafting exceptional identities. Three, the love of the spectacular. In order to appeal to these hypermodern bodies,

the image's privileged subjects who are imperative to meaning making, organizations need to mirror these hypermodern audiences by creating an expanded conceptualization of organizational identity focused on their core values, character and soul; humanize and personalize this expanded conceptualization of identity through the ethos of the individual rhetor; and then employ spectacular visual imagery to rhetorically co-construct their identities and enable identification with these hypermodern audiences. See Figure 1 for the proposed conceptual framework.

For instance, Nike's organizational identity reflected in its slogan, *Just Do It*, is built around the idea of an organization that is committed to an intense focus on action, on pushing boundaries to actualize possibilities. Instead of staying bound by notions of organizational identity focused on the collective organizational self (He and Brown, 2013) Nike personalizes organizational identity by tapping on the ethos of individual rhetors such as Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, and Serena Williams. It then employs emotion-laden appeals and striking visual imagery to rhetorically construct its corporate identity. Each of these factors - the core, distinctive character of the organization, individual rhetors, and spectacular visual imagery - together comprise the ingredients needed to enable identification with hypermodern audiences who might themselves be searching for individual identities premised on breaking boundaries and standing up for what one believes in. For these visually acculturated hypermodern audiences, posting online striking pictures of going for a run in an exotic location, while wearing Nike shoes could be a manifestation of not only identification with the company but also of drawing from Nike's corporate identity to feed into the rhetorical construction of a fantastical individual identity built on notions of fitness and adventure. This idea also resonates with the idea of narrative transportation or the view that that an image must narrate, act, and resonate (NAR) to encourage narrative processing and thus transport viewers into the organizational narrative (Nikulina *et al.*, 2024).

Applying Symbolic Convergence Theory (Bormann, 2001) to message design (Smudde and Courtright, 2018), one can argue that Nike's commitment to pushing boundaries of action, as a central, enduring, distinctive feature of its identity, conveyed through striking visual imagery could rhetorically create a fantasy theme in its messaging that catches the imagination of hypermodern audiences, which could generate symbolic cues, fantasy types and sagas across multiple individual rhetors that tie in with the identity construction of hypermodern audiences who might see themselves as adventurers, or brave warriors standing up for something. It can also be argued that Burke's concept of dramatism is at play here as identification can be realized through message design (Smudde and Courtright, 2018) when Nike enacts dramas about issues of advocacy that are compatible with hypermodern audiences' dramas about the same issue.

In this respect, organizations can also borrow from influencer marketing wherein individual social media influencers leverage their authenticity with spectacular visual rhetoric to build and maintain relationships with their followers (Abidin and Ots, 2015; Khamis *et al.*, 2016). For instance, social media entrepreneurs such as Kylie Jenner and Huda Kattan have built successful businesses premised on rhetorical personification conveyed

through hyperspectacles. Similarly, organizations need to focus on their core identity, who they are, their soul, and their character in a way that will enable stakeholder identification for those hypermodern audiences that are seeking to create their own unique identities. They then need to communicate organizational identity using individual rhetors and visual hyperspectacles that will appeal to hypermodern audiences. In this way, organizations will be in sync with their audiences and can hope to achieve stakeholder identification. Although this paper considered visuals as being able to transcend cultural and national boundaries, the strand of scholarly research on visual social semiotics argues that visual communication strategies might differ by cultural or national contexts as meanings are often negotiated between the producer and the viewer, and reflects the social, political, and cultural beliefs, values and attitudes of specific contexts (Aiello, 2020; Harrison, 2003; Sommer, 2021). Hence, organizations might also want to customize their visual communication strategies depending on cultural or national contexts of practice.

Tab. 1: The conceptual framework

Organizations	To create fantasy themes, symbolic cues, fantasy types and sagas that can rhetorically enable identification with	Hypermodern Audiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanize and personalize organizational identity through the ethos of individual rhetors • Conveyed through spectacular visual imagery 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who create extraordinary identities based on • Intense consumption of emotion-rich experiences • Conveyed through spectacular visual imagery

Source: Author's own illustration

7. Conclusion

This conceptual paper argued that to accomplish organizational rhetoric's purpose of identification between organizations and their audiences, organizations ought to articulate their organizational identity constructed around their soul and character, through individual rhetors, and visually spectacular constructions of organizational identity. These spectacles of communicated visual identity can then generate fantasy themes, symbolic cues, fantasy types and sagas that can enable identification with hypermodern audiences, who are visually acculturated. The arguments proposed in this paper have important implications for theory and practice.

Theoretically, it has added perspectives from the sociological trend of hypermodernity to our understanding of visually acculturated audiences. The paper has achieved this by highlighting connections among literatures on visual rhetoric, hypermodernity, and organizational identity, adding to bodies of work at the intersections of visual studies, organizational rhetoric and communication. Specifically, it has added a sociological perspective to the body of knowledge on the reasons for the popularity and effectiveness

of visuals in the age of social media. While existing literature clearly situates reasons for popularity on the characteristics of visuals themselves (Doerr and Mattoni, 2014; Flam and Doerr, 2015; Seo, 2014) and on their ability to trigger heuristic thinking through affective shortcuts (Dixon, 2016; Kim and Cameron, 2011) this paper has provided insights into audience characteristics that could explain the rise in popularity of visuals. It has also added insights to the literature on the construction of identities by individuals and organizations over social media (Adami and Jewitt, 2016) and most importantly, to the body of knowledge on organizational rhetoric that has tended to be organization- and message-centric largely ignoring the role of visuals and the audience (Edwards, 2018; Kjeldsen, 2018; Leitch and Neilson, 2001).

Practically, communicators in organizations across domains such as internal communication, corporate communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising can interrogate current practices of identity building and enable identification with visually acculturated audiences through a return to the basics - of articulating who they are, and co-creating identity through individual rhetors using visual spectacles that might appeal to hypermodern audiences who are just as driven by an intense focus on the self, and on creating extraordinary and unique identities based on experiential, emotion-rich consumption and their love of the spectacular. Practitioners could identify individual actors/rhetors who personify the organization's identity, then employ emotional appeals, and striking visual imagery that can capture the attention of visually attuned hypermodern audiences to convey their corporate identity.

This exploratory conceptual paper could be followed up with empirical work. For instance, future studies could create research instruments that could help to identify hypermodern audiences. Future research can draw on existing instruments that help to measure individuals' need to craft unique identities, need for emotional experiences, and affinity for spectacular visual imagery to create a composite instrument that can help to identify hypermodern audiences. Not all visually acculturated audiences will be hypermodern. However, as seen from the explanations given in this paper, some of them could be driven by hypermodern motivations. It is imperative to understand who these audiences are to engage with the most relevant set of audiences. Creating such a research instrument can help with understanding and segmenting these audiences. Studies can also examine the processes through which visual rhetoric of organizational identity accomplishes identification with hypermodern audiences. For instance, empirical work can content analyze communication campaigns to identify the use of individual rhetors, the extent of their personification of corporate identity, the use of emotional appeals, and the spectacularity of visuals employed. It can further run quasi experiments or surveys to see which aspects of these campaigns lead to greater identification with hypermodern audiences. Future research can also conduct focus groups with audiences who identify as hypermodern to assess what aspects of organizational communication resonate the most with them and why. Finally, future research could examine how visual communication strategies might differ by cultural or national contexts reflecting variations in contexts of practice,

thus deepening our understanding of the applicability of theories across different settings.

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Sinergie Italian Journal of Management

Useful information for readers and authors

What is the positioning of Sinergie Italian Journal of Management?

Sinergie Italian Journal of Management, the official journal of the Società Italiana di Management (SIMA-the Italian Society of Management), is a peer-reviewed scholarly publication that presents leading research across all business and management areas and focuses on the main trends and boundary-pushing ideas in management studies.

What is this journal's topic coverage?

The journal has a broad thematic profile and covers various areas in the business and management field, such as strategic management, corporate governance, entrepreneurship, international business, sustainability, small and family business, operations and supply chains, strategic communication, marketing, retailing and service management, innovation and technology management, tourism and culture management and, of course, business ethics and general management.

What is "Italian" in Sinergie Italian Journal of Management?

This journal aims both to bring the Italian management perspective to the international debate and to encourage scholars worldwide to contribute through an innovative approach on topics relevant to the sound conduct of businesses and other organisations. The journal's keywords include, but are not limited to, management applications specially relevant to the Italian economy and other mature economies, such as manufacturing, creativity, sustainability, open *Innovation*, digital transformation, entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized enterprises, family business, networks, alliances and territorial ecosystems, innovative value proposals and circular business models, as well as to the management of specific businesses, such as food, fashion, furniture, industrial equipment, art, culture, tourism, design and luxury.

How broad is the scope of this journal?

Sinergie Italian Journal of Management aims to balance relevance with methodological rigour and encourages interpretation, reasoning and critical, context-aware discussion about phenomena and their managerial implications. Narrow discussions focussed only on highly specific sub-fields will be regarded as non-priority.

Which research approach does this journal welcome?

The journal is open to different research approaches and welcomes both conceptual and empirical contributions that employ a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research approach. It also accepts case

studies, provided the analysis is adequate. Review articles that move beyond description to propose critical reflection and sound theoretical contributions are also welcome.

Issues frequency and coverage

When is the journal published during the year and are special issues part of the editorial planning?

The journal is published every quarter. It welcomes both the submission of manuscripts to be published in its regular issues and of manuscripts to be published in special issues edited by guest editors. Special thematic issues have always been a prominent feature of Sinergie Italian Journal of Management. Currently, the Editors are encouraging the development of special issues on relevant management themes that fit the journal's scope.

Principles and vision

What principles drive the conduct of this journal?

A few fundamental principles drive the conduct of Sinergie Italian Journal of Management:

- **Relevance:** The journal values the usefulness of research to improving management practice and to addressing business challenges and socially relevant issues.
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What vision has inspired the development of this journal?

Connections between research, ethics, creative thinking and managerial action are the foundational premises on which to build a future based on the common good.

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Sinergie is a double-blind reviewed journal.

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The peer-review process can lead to:

- acceptance of the paper as it is
- acceptance with minor proposals for improvements
- acceptance subject to substantial modifications
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The review forms will be sent back to the corresponding author, who must return the paper within a specified time frame after revising it according to the reviewers' comments. In case of substantial modifications and of "revise and resubmit", the manuscript is sent again to reviewers for further evaluation.

Guidance by the editor-in-chief, guest editors and blind referees results in a 'training ground for young researchers', which at the time of foundation was declared as the mission of *Sinergie* by its founder, Giovanni Panati.

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1. correctness of the methodological approach
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The submission procedure requires authors to provide:

Two separate files (.doc):

- The first file should be called 'IA', and it should include only the title of the paper, information about the authors (qualifications, scientific sector, email addresses and corresponding author's mobile phone number, which will be reserved for internal use), possible allocation of paragraphs, acknowledgements and references to research projects that led to the drafting of the paper.
- The second file should be called 'FP'. It must not contain any details regarding the author(s), or any information that could be traced back to the author(s) (e.g. acknowledgements and similar expressions).

To ensure the quality of the editing, especially of tables, graphs and figures, the preferred format is Microsoft Word, but compatible formats are accepted as well. Files in .bmp, .jpeg, .jpg, .png and .gif formats can create problems in editing. If possible, please avoid these formats and provide files containing additional tables and graphs in their original format (e.g. xls). Footnotes should be used only for comments, to provide more detail or alternative considerations; they should not contain bibliographic information.

What is the acceptable word limit and what are the other editorial guidelines to follow when submitting a paper to this journal?

Length

The paper should not exceed 10.000 words, including charts, figures, tables, footnotes and references.

Title

No longer than 125 characters (spaces included).

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No longer than 300 words. The abstract must be structured according to the following layout: frame of the research, purpose of the paper, methodology, results, research limitations, practical implications and originality of the study.

Keywords

A minimum of three and a maximum of six keywords must be included to identify the framework of the study's main topic.

Text style

The body of the text and of the notes must be justified.

Italics may be used to emphasise certain parts of the text and for English words that are not commonly used. Neither boldface (except in paragraph titles) nor underlining should be used.

Text graphic rules

Quotations must be indicated by double quotation marks (“...”) followed by the cited author's surname, year of publication and page number(s) (e.g., Panati, 1981, pp. 48–53). The author is responsible for referencing sources in the reference list, which means that all citations in the text must have a corresponding entry in the reference list before the file is uploaded. Citations that are not indicated in the reference list will be removed from the text. Footnotes are only to be used for comments, in-depth investigations and further remarks, and not as bibliographical references.

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References and Internet websites

References must be placed at the end of the text. They should be listed in alphabetical order and, for authors with multiple references, ordered chronologically. References must be formatted as follows:

Books

PORTER. M. (1985), *The competitive advantage: creating and sustaining superior performance*, Free Press, New York.

Articles

BACCARANI C., GOLINELLI G.M. (2015), "The non-existent firm: relations between corporate image and strategy", *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*, vol. 33, n. 97, pp. 313-323.

Book chapters

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